

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in
THE SECRET OF
FOG MOUNTAIN





in

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OF
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Jupiter, Pete and Bob are on a hike in the Rocky Mountains. On the way up a mountain, they lose their way and walk into an impenetrable fog enveloping the peak. With low visibility, they encounter a ghostly apparition, but they frantically manage to escape. They then learn of the history and legend of the mountain—including a mysterious phantom that haunts the place. The Three Investigators decide to solve the secret of the mountain, and invariably get themselves into more trouble...

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of Fog Mountain

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(The Three ??? and the Fog Mountain)

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1. Disturbance of the Peace

Something beeped.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

The sound wriggled like a worm in Bob's ear canal, fluttering like an annoying insect on the threshold between sleeping and waking. For a moment, Bob tried to resist it, but then he was awake.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

An alarm clock! Not his, but Pete's, who probably slept peacefully in the sleeping bag next to him and didn't notice.

"Pete!" growled Bob. Nothing moved. "Pete! Turn off your stupid alarm clock!"

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Bob buried his head under the rolled up sweater he had used as a pillow and covered his ears. It was no use.

"Pete!" cried Jupiter, who was sleeping in the other corner of the tent. Angrily, he shook Pete's shoulder.

Pete woke up, opened his eyes and mumbled: "I was listening! I'm awake! What was the question?"

Bob rolled his eyes. "You're not in school, Pete. You're in a tent. It's early in the morning, and your alarm clock's been ringing for a long time. Turn it off. Now!"

Pete began to understand the situation and heard the beep.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

That was indeed the travel alarm clock he had taken with him. Somehow it had accidentally gone off by itself.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Where was that stupid thing?

"Turn it off!" Bob repeated angrily. He turned around and tried to ignore the beeping and go back to sleep.

"I'd like to, but I don't know where—" Pete said.

"In your backpack," Jupiter suggested annoyingly.

The backpacks were lying at the foot of the tent. Pete peeled himself out of his sleeping bag in an effort to disturb the others as little as possible. It was not easy because the tent was narrow.

"Ouch!" complained Bob as Pete's knee hit him in the back.

"Sorry." Pete groped his way forward in the dark, got hold of the backpack and fumbled with the numerous zips.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Where did he put the alarm clock? He couldn't remember. He must have slipped all the way down. Pete emptied the backpack one by one and threw the clothes behind him.

"That's enough, Pete!" cried Jupiter. "Stop throwing your stinking socks at me!"

“Man, this tent is just too small! Where else am I going to put it?”

“At least not to my face! It’s really disgusting!” Jupiter yelled.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“I can’t find this stupid thing!” Pete cried.

“Why don’t you just turn on the light?” Bob said.

“I don’t know where the flashlight is,” Pete replied.

Bob moaned. Now he was finally awake. There was no chance of ever going back to sleep. He stood up, scanned the corner of the tent where he was lying and handed Pete the flashlight.

“Thank you.” The bright beam of light blinded all three at first.

“Hey!” Jupiter rebelled. “That’s my backpack you’re clearing out!”

“What? Really? I didn’t see that in the dark.” Pete grinned. “So much for smelly socks, Jupe.”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Jupiter was not in a joking mood. “Turn that thing off!”

“I can’t find it!” Pete yelled.

“Are you sure it’s the right backpack this time?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes.”

Now Jupiter and Bob took part in the search. Within seconds, the inside of the tent was a chaos of clothes, camping gear and hiking boots. No trace of the alarm clock.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Why did you even bring that thing, Pete?” Bob said. “An alarm clock! It’s a vacation, remember?”

“You never know what you might need it for,” Pete defended himself.

“Right. For example, to drive us crazy in the middle of the night at—” Bob looked at his watch, “—at three o’clock. Where is that thing?”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Shh!” Jupiter hissed. “Be quiet!”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Do you hear that?” Jupiter asked.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“What?” Bob asked.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“That’s not coming out of the backpack,” Jupiter said.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“It’s somewhere else in the tent. Shine the light over here, Pete.”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Sounds like it’s coming from my sleeping bag,” Pete said. “But that’s hardly likely—I was just in there.”

Pete tapped the foot end—and felt a small, hard object. “Oh no!”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Pete!” growled Bob. “I’ll kill you! The alarm clock’s in your sleeping bag?”

“I don’t know how it got in there,” Pete assured himself and hurried to get the travel alarm clock out of its hiding place. “It must have slipped in there somehow.”

“Great,” said Jupiter with a look at the chaos they had caused.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Pete turned off the alarm clock.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief and enjoyed the silence for seconds.

Then the earth shook.

Bob's travel diary:

I am sitting on a rock at the edge of a forest near a babbling brook somewhere in the Rocky Mountains, chewing on a dry piece of bread and watching the sky again and again. It looks like rain. And rain is the last thing I need right now.

It's the second day on the road and in these two days, pretty much everything can go wrong. But I haven't got around to writing in this little book yet, so I'd better start from the beginning.

It was Pete's idea to go hiking this holiday. He wanted to go to the mountains, to solitude, far away from all people, far away from anything that could get us into trouble. I thought it was a good idea. I can't even remember a vacation where we really went on vacation instead of working on a case that sooner or later became dangerous for us.

Jupe, of course, was not so enthusiastic. First of all, it can't be dangerous enough for him and secondly, of course, hiking has something to do with physical exertion, which our First Investigator still hates like the plague. But miracle after miracle, in the end, we managed to prevail—even though we were subjected to the condition that Jupe determines the itinerary. And since he is our man for extremes, we haven't met a soul since our departure yesterday morning.

We went in Pete's car through the middle of the Rocky Mountains, one of the loneliest areas in the world, it seems to me, even though Jupe pointed out to me that the population density in this part of the world is only slightly below the global average. However, I don't feel it.

We finally reached a lonely car park, which is now two days' walk away, to start from there. The catastrophe began when we put on our backpacks. They weighed about one tonne and we had to leave half of the contents in the boot before we could start. Of course, we weren't very careful with this, as we only noticed it when it was too late. For example, the can opener was left behind, but the cans were not, and last night, Pete cut his finger while trying to open a can of tomato soup for us. Then we realized that the plasters were also left in the car.

Pete now walks around with a knotted handkerchief on his thumb and moans every five minutes that the wound (it's only a small scratch at most!) will surely become terribly inflamed as he wouldn't be able to see a doctor for ten days. He is already thinking about what professions he can do later, once the right thumb is amputated. Apart from that, he is the fittest of the three of us as usual and can take most of the breaks because he always has to wait for us.

Twice we've been lost. Jupe has a good map with him, but sometimes the paths are nothing more than barely visible trails through the forest, and if you are not careful and walk past one, you risk huge detours.

Jupe shows a strange mixture of self-pity and determination. He pants and sweats under the weight of his backpack (although I suspect he cheated in his favour when he redistributed the weight) and would love to take one break after another. But on the other hand, he doesn't want to admit his weakness—and certainly not to us. After all, he determines the route and is now committed to keep to the schedule, which envisages that we will make a big circuit in ten days and arrive back at the car park at the end. I always have to stop laughing when I see Jupe squirming in the trap he has set for himself.

And me? I am doing quite well so far, apart from the fact that I have a nasty blister under my left foot and everything else hurts. Plus, I'm hungry all the time. Our supplies are slowly running out, but we can't buy anything before tomorrow evening. The mood is mixed. If it should start to rain now, I can't guarantee anything.

Oh yes, our first night in the much too small tent was a catastrophe of uncomfortable forest ground, snoring in stereo sound, bad breath and Pete's alarm clock, which started beeping at three o'clock and then didn't go off. In the end, he found it in his sleeping bag. Stupid thing! A can opener would have brought us more.

And then there was a small earthquake. Back home in Rocky Beach, we probably wouldn't have noticed it, but since we were awake... Jupe says that earthquakes are unusual in this area. But he is probably just desperately looking for mysterious events to think about so that his brain doesn't get rusty during this vacation. It's probably his biggest worry that The Three Investigators could actually spend a completely unspectacular vacation this time. But if I see it right, he'll have to come to terms with that.

There is simply nothing here except the great outdoors. And without people, there would be no crimes either, so Jupe can take a break from mental workouts—if that is even possible. Although Pete claims, stiffly and firmly, that he heard on the radio that a convict named Radcliffe, who has been on the run for weeks and is dangerous to the public, has been seen here in the mountains. But that was a couple of weeks ago and the guy is definitely a few states away. I think Pete just doesn't feel comfortable if he can't be afraid of something.

More soon as we have to go now. The others are already pushing.

2. Lost!

“Now put that stupid book away, Bob, or we’ll never make our milestone today!” Jupiter demanded.

“It’s okay!” Bob Andrews wrote one last sentence, then he put his diary in his backpack. Groaning, he shouldered it and pulled the waist belt up with one tug. That way the fifteen kilos on his back could be endured.

“Let’s do it!” Pete cheered his friends on. “Heading east towards the rain clouds, yay! And up ahead is our hiking trail, which consists almost entirely of huge stones, great for slipping and breaking your foot! That’s all I needed after the thing with my thumb. Hopefully there will be a doctor in this place which we reach tomorrow. Otherwise—”

“—Your thumb has to be amputated,” said Jupiter and Bob as if from one mouth. “All right, Pete.”

They set off. The trail led along the edge of a coniferous forest. To the left lay the impenetrable darkness of the forest, where the tree trunks rose up as straight as a candle like the columns in a cathedral and disappeared into the dense crown of needles. Stretched between the trees were spider webs, glittered silvery in the humid air. On the right, they had a wonderful view of wild meadows whose flowers bloomed in the most colourful colours between mossy rocks.

The landscape was beautiful, Jupiter had to admit that. But as soon as he looked ahead, the pleasure vanished. The path led steeply uphill. It was stony and slippery and Jupiter took every third step so unfavourably that his ankles hurt. And when the path led around a bend and Jupiter could catch a glimpse of what lay ahead, he saw only one thing—mountains—mountains as far as the eye could see. Which devil had ridden him when he chose this route?

Jupiter wiped the first beads of sweat from his forehead, put his thumbs behind the straps of the backpack to take the strain off his shoulders and turned his gaze to the stony path. After a short time, Pete had taken the lead, followed by Bob. Jupiter came last. He had got used to it by now, but he didn’t mind. He wasn’t in the mood for a conversation anyway. He was glad when he had his peace for a while and did not have to expose himself to the reproaches of his friends. He also needed all his strength to put one foot in front of the other. It went on and on uphill.

They walked for two hours without a break. Only now and then did Jupiter take a refreshing sip from his water bottle that he had filled up in the morning at a small stream. The forest still lay to the left, but the tree population was becoming sparser and the trees smaller. They already seemed to be at a considerable height. Jupiter tried to recall the route—and stopped. Why hadn’t he checked the route for two hours anyway?

“Hey!” he shouted. Bob was fifty metres ahead of him, and there was no sign of Pete. “Hey! Wait up!”

Bob reacted, called for Pete and finally they gathered at a small rock.

“What is it?” Pete asked. “Are you going to take another break?”

“No,” Jupiter lied. “I just want to know if we are still on the right track. I hope you kept an eye on the map, Pete?”

“The map?” asked the Second Investigator. “You have it all the time.”

"No, you got it," Jupiter insisted.

"Nope," Pete said.

"Tell me you're not serious," Jupiter said.

"I never had the map! After all, you are the boss," Pete argued.

Jupiter ran his hand over his face and took off his backpack.

"What are you doing? A break?" Pete asked.

"I'm looking for the map!" hissed Jupiter. "And you should do the same! We're stuck without a map, in case you didn't realize." He opened his backpack and started to rummage through it. After a while, the others did the same.

"Well, I have not seen the map today." Bob confirmed after checking his backpack.

"It's not here," Pete said, closing his backpack.

"Are you sure? Maybe it's in your sleeping bag," Jupiter quipped. "You should find a lot of things there."

"Nonsense! How is it supposed to get in there?"

"That's what I was wondering about your alarm clock."

"You had the map the whole time, Juve!" cried Pete angrily. "Why can't you admit you lost it?"

"Because I haven't lost it! During our lunch break, you studied the map—and probably took it."

"I didn't study it, I used it as a mat so the bread wouldn't get wet. After that, I didn't take it."

"Then where is it?" Jupiter asked.

"If you were foolish enough not to take it with you—probably still at our last stop," Pete finally said.

"If you misuse a \$14.95 map as a picnic mat, you are obliged to fold it up again and take it with you!"

"Guys!" cried Bob. "This is no good! The map's gone. Who's to blame for that, it doesn't matter. The question is, what do we do now?"

Jupiter sighed and let himself fall into the damp grass. The bottom of his trousers got wet immediately. He didn't care. Nothing mattered. The map was two hours behind them—a universe far away.

"Well, I guess we'll have to go get it back," Bob said after a while, trying to sound light-hearted.

"Two hours downhill and then two hours uphill again?" Jupiter asked.

"Absolutely not!" Pete gasped.

"If we leave the backpacks here, we'll make it faster," Jupiter said. "We could be back in three hours."

"And by then the backpacks will be stolen," Pete said.

"By whom, Pete? There's nobody here!" Jupiter remarked.

"This escaped convict, for example," Pete replied.

Bob rolled his eyes. "One of us could stay here and guard our things."

"And who, pray tell? I'm not staying with the backpacks alone when there's a felon running around!" Pete cried.

"Besides, we don't have three hours, Bob," Jupiter added. "The three hours we need extra today will be missing tomorrow, which means we won't get to Green Valley tomorrow night. We can't buy supplies and we'll starve miserably."

"Don't exaggerate, Juve!" Bob hissed.

"I'm not exaggerating," Jupiter said. "We're already low on food."

"Is Green Valley the only place in the world?" Pete asked. "I can't imagine. There must be other villages in the mountains."

"There are," said Jupiter. "But how are we going to find them without a map?"

"So we'll have to go back and get that map one way or another," Bob summed up, although he was the last person who felt like walking all the way back.

But the First Investigator shook his head. "Not necessarily. There is another possibility."

"Which is?" Pete asked.

"We'll try to find Green Valley without a map and buy a new one there."

"And how is that possible?" Pete probed further.

"I looked at the map very carefully. Maybe I can put it back together in my head. It's not gonna be easy, though, because we missed one turn already."

"We didn't," Pete objected. "In the last two hours, there has been no turns. If there had been, I would have waited for you to ask you which way to go."

"There must have been one," Jupiter insisted. "For one thing I know for sure—our route certainly didn't take us uphill all the time. The plan was to circle this mountain instead of climbing it. But now we have come quite a long way, so I would suggest we just keep going, cross the mountain and meet our actual route on the other side. From there I definitely know the way."

"Sounds pretty easy," Bob thought. "I just hope it works out."

"I don't see why not," Jupiter said confidently.

"The famous last words," Pete said gloomily. "All right. If you think you can handle it, then let's go."

The First Investigator stood up, shouldered his backpack and looked up the path, "If we know the directions now, this would be no problem at all."

Pete looked around for a moment. Then he pointed to the forest and said, "That's north."

Bob raised his eyebrows in surprise. "The sun has completely disappeared behind the clouds. How do you know that's north? You got a compass in your head or something?"

The Second Investigator smiled superiorly. "I may not be as smart as Juve and not as well-read as you, Bob, but my sense of direction has always been quite brilliant, you'll have to admit. Besides, there are some very simple clues. These rocks here, for example. They're covered with moss. Especially on one side. Logically, the one that gets the most water. And since here in the mountains there's mostly north wind, the side of the rocks where the most moss grows because the wind slaps the rain on it must be the north side."

"I would have known that," Jupiter claimed.

"I guess so, Juve. But you don't have an eye for these things."

"Pete's right," Bob said. "While you're sitting in front of the computer all day at Headquarters, Pete is jogging and biking through the woods."

"How good it is that we have a real nature boy with us," said Jupiter.

Pete was not sure whether it was recognition or ridicule that resonated in Jupiter's voice. He decided to take credit and said, "Let's go, fellas!"

They continued their hike. It didn't take long until Pete had taken the lead again and Jupiter was a good distance behind them.

The landscape became more barren and rocky. After half an hour, the forest retreated completely, leaving behind an endless landscape of stones and grass stretching in all directions, over which a strong wind swept. It still went uphill, but the summit was not visible. It disappeared in the clouds that seemed to hang lower with every step and swept over

their heads at an insane speed. Apart from grass, moss and a few crippled bushes, there was no life up here. Not a single bird could be seen in the sky, not an insect buzzing through the air, not to mention mice and rabbits. And then the fog came.

Practically from one minute to the next, a wall of white moisture moved towards the three hikers and enveloped them. The world disappeared into a murky grey soup and Jupiter could only see ten metres away.

“Wow!” cried Pete from somewhere out of nowhere in front of him. “What’s wrong now?”

“We are in a cloud,” explained Bob, who had also disappeared, and Jupiter was annoyed that he had not thought of it himself. Of course this was no normal fog, there was no such thing at this altitude. It was actually a cloud that stuck to the slope they had climbed.

“Wait up, you two!” cried Jupiter. “From now on we’d better stay together or we’ll lose each other!”

“Then walk a little faster,” teased Pete.

Together they wandered on. It was spooky. The world had shrunk to a circle of almost a hundred metres in diameter, and became steadily smaller the higher they rose. Behind it all was swallowed up by the white-grey cloud mass. It was as if they were moving through absolute darkness in a spotlight—with the difference that the darkness was not dark, but bright.

They could not even guess what was behind the cloud wall. Were they just passing the summit? A mountain village? By a stream? Was it still far to their planned route? Even the path became increasingly unclear. What an hour ago had been a clear hiking trail through the lush green of the wild meadow had turned into a hardly recognizable path, which was completely overgrown with grass again and again over long distances.

Eventually the trail disappeared completely and The Three Investigators wandered through the open field past flat rocks. Around them was only light, textured grey.

Pete stopped. “I don’t want to alarm you, fellas, but do you have any idea if we’re still on the right track?”

“Is the track gone?” Bob asked mockingly.

“I mean the right direction.”

“That’s your responsibility,” Bob reminded Pete. “You and your built-in compass.”

“Sorry, but it’s completely failing right now,” Pete said. “These clouds are driving me crazy. There’s nothing to look at!”

“And the moss on the rocks doesn’t help us anymore,” Jupiter remarked. “We are in the clouds, the moisture comes from all sides here.”

“You don’t say?” grumbled Pete. “I’m soaked to the skin and I didn’t even realize it. Stupid rain!”

“There is no rain in the clouds,” Jupiter corrected.

“But plenty of wet air. I almost feel like we’re underwater,” Pete said. “What should we do now? If we go around in circles, we’ve completely lost our direction.”

“You should have brought a compass, Pete, instead of your stupid alarm clock,” Bob said.

“I wanted to! But Jupiter said we didn’t need a compass. We have the map,” Pete argued. “If you hadn’t left it back there, you would have been right.”

“Don’t start that again,” Bob asked. “We should think about which direction we’re going. It’s starting to seem strange to me that we keep going uphill and we still haven’t reached the summit. The mountains here aren’t that high after all!”

“All right!” Jupiter gave in. “Let’s make a plan. We should—”

“Hey!” Pete interrupted him. “Look!” He pointed in the direction of the steepest climb, into the fog.

At first, Bob and Jupiter didn’t know what he meant. But then they saw it too. There was something just far enough away that it almost disappeared into the fog. There was a brightly shining figure floating almost motionless in the grey air. Its outline flickered strangely transparent. The human-like figure seemed to stare at them, although no eyes could be made out in the contourless face.

“What... what is that?” stuttered Pete and involuntarily took a step back. “Do you see that?”

“Yes,” whispered Jupiter and a cold shiver went through his body. “It... It’s not moving. But it saw us. It—” That was as far as he got.

Suddenly, the apparition moved its head slightly and gave off a blood-curdling howl!

3. The Race Downhill!

The Three Investigators flinched! The howling was horrible. It sounded like the call of a wolf, like the screeching of a cat, like the cry of a child, all united in an endlessly long, ear-painful, horrible wailing sound straight from hell!

Pete screamed, too. He couldn't help it. "What is this? What is this creature?"

But they were unable to answer. Petrified, they gave in to their horror and looked over to the figure who was still hovering motionless in the fog, screaming. Then it spread its arms. And came towards them. Very slowly the creature moved through the air, staggering in their direction, metre by metre. The howling became louder and louder.

"Let's go!" yelled Pete, spun around and ran. He ran across the meadow, downhill, away, just away from that creature! The grass was wet and slippery. Pete fell and landed with his head a hair's breadth from a rock. A short distance to the right and the boulder would have split his skull!

Bob and Jupiter ran past him. The phantom was behind them, faster now. It had caught up a bit. Its scream roared in Pete's ears. Half mad with panic, he picked himself up and ran on. Keep going! Keep going! Away from this meadow! Away from this mountain! Away from this... thing!

They ran and ran, slipping halfway down the slope, falling again and again, jumping recklessly over rocks that suddenly appeared out of the fog in front of them. Soon the slope was so steep that Pete could not stop. He couldn't turn around either. In panic, he stared at the ground in front of his feet, dodging rocks and dangerous hollows and praying that he would not slip again. The next fall could end badly!

At a crazy pace, The Three Investigators raced downhill. And suddenly they were out of the fog, the clouds were above them again, and they had a clear view of what lay ahead of them—not two hundred metres away, the wet-black trunks of a coniferous forest rose up, which put a natural end to the grass slope.

One hundred and fifty metres. Too close! If Pete couldn't stop his insane run, a tree would. A cruel image flashed in his imagination—needle-sharp stumps of branches protruding horizontally from the trunks at head height, just waiting for him to run face first at full speed...

A hundred metres. Pete tried to steer his run, found a halfway rock-free spot—and let himself fall. The force of the impact sent a wave of pain through his body, then he rolled and slid down the meadow. The backpack bored into his back, tore at his shoulders and finally burst open at the side. Now Pete slid towards the forest feet first. A rock came towards him. The Second Investigator put his heels into the wet grass and slowed down. Then his feet hit a boulder, his legs bouncing back and forth... and finally lay still.

His heart was racing. He closed his eyes. It took a moment before he realized that he was actually alive—and that all his bones were still in place. He would have preferred to stay there with his eyes closed for all eternity. See nothing, hear nothing, move nothing. But then reality seeped into his stunned consciousness. Jupiter! Bob! The phantom!

He opened his eyes, straightened up and looked around. Jupiter and Bob had done the same and let themselves fall. The First Investigator had come to a standstill a bit above, while

Bob had slid almost to the edge of the forest. There was nothing more to see of the ghostly apparition—and fortunately nothing to hear.

“Are you all right?” cried Pete in a trembling voice. “Hey! Are you still there?”

Jupiter moved. “All right,” he croaked and slowly picked himself up. “I think. You’ve lost a bit there, Pete.”

The Second Investigator turned around. For the last fifty metres, he had left a trail of clothes, towels and camping gear that had fallen out of his broken backpack. But he could take care of that later. “What about Bob?”

Bob was still lying motionless at the edge of the forest. Pete got up and rushed to him. “Bob! Bob, say something!”

He opened his eyes. “Damn! I lost a contact lens.”

Pete breathed again. “If it is nothing more, are you okay?”

“I think so,” Bob said and tried to get up. A sharp pain twitched through his right foot. “Ow!”

“What? Is it broken?” Pete asked.

Bob moved his foot carefully. “I don’t think so. But something else. It definitely hurts.”

“Can you walk?” Pete wondered.

Bob tried. “Yes. But not for long and not far.”

“We have to get out of here. Away from this meadow and that... that thing!” Pete cried. At that moment, he became frightened. The mere thought of the eerie creature sent a wave of adrenaline rushing through his body.

“What was that?” Bob asked and looked from Pete to Jupiter, who was just coming down the hill exhausted.

“I don’t know,” the First Investigator confessed. “All I know is that it scared the hell out of me.”

“I’m still trembling all over!” Pete agreed. “Let’s get out of here as fast as we can!”

“And go where?” Jupiter asked.

“I don’t care. Just go!” Pete exclaimed.

“I don’t mind. We’ll just keep going downhill through the forest,” Jupiter decided. “At some point, we have to find a way. Then we’ll see.”

Together, they collected Pete’s scattered belongings, stuffed them back into his backpack and patched the hole with a few safety pins. The others had lost nothing. They were only wet from head to toe and dirty from their breathtaking run down the valley. Again and again, they threw uncertain looks up the mountain. Not far above them, the slope was swallowed by the clouds. Above this magical limit, a whole phantom army could lurk without them seeing it.

“Let’s get out of here,” Pete said as soon as he shouldered his backpack.

They entered the forest and immediately it became darker. The Second Investigator looked at his watch. In just over an hour, the sun would set. Then they had perhaps half an hour of twilight before it was pitch dark. By then, they must have found a decent place to camp.

Pete shuddered at the thought of spending the next night in this wilderness not far from the top of the mountain where... He put the idea out of his mind and took a step.

The hike through the forest was difficult. There was no path, they had to cut through the undergrowth, climb over fallen trees and avoid huge fern-covered clearings because the plants blocked their way. Bob limped and twisted his face in pain with every step. He wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer, but they had to leave the forest behind, because it was impossible to pitch the tents here. And they needed a stream to have at least some water.

The path seemed endless and it got darker and darker, but finally, when there was hardly any daylight under the treetops, the forest receded and they saw a path.

"At last!" moaned Pete. "It's about time. Okay, fellas. To the left or to the right? Where is the next town? I have absolutely no idea where we are."

"Do you think we feel any different?" Bob asked.

"Wait a minute," Jupiter said and pinched his lower lip. "I don't want to alarm you, but... but doesn't this path seem familiar to you?"

Pete frowned. "It's just a hiking trail. They all look the same. There's the forest on one side, and meadow on the other."

"No, I think you're right, Jupe," Bob said. "I feel like I know all this, too."

"That way!" Jupiter decided and started moving abruptly.

"What's with him?" Pete wondered, but followed him willingly.

The further they went, the stranger the area seemed to him. The unpleasant suspicion was soon confirmed when they turned around a bend and discovered a familiar rock formation at the edge of the forest.

"Oh, no," Pete gasped.

"Oh, yes," Jupiter said.

"Our rest stop today at noon!" cried Bob. "I don't believe it. We've been going in circles!"

"Looks that way," Jupiter said.

"But how could this happen?" Bob asked. "It was all uphill!"

"Probably once we circled the mountaintop in a spiral. Or even several times. And then straight down again at a rapid pace," Jupiter said.

They needed a moment to digest the shock.

But then Pete said, "There's one good thing, though."

"And what, pray tell?" Bob asked.

"Look what's behind that boulder." Pete bent down and picked up the wet but otherwise unbroken map.

Bob's travel diary:

So we decided to set up camp at our old rest stop. There is water nearby, and although it is freezing cold, we were able to wash off the dirt from our slide. I kept my right foot in the stream for half an hour until it was completely numb. It was a little swollen, but it's fine now.

Tomorrow I won't be able to walk that far, that's for sure. Our clothes are wet. And if the sun doesn't finally show itself tomorrow, the clothes won't dry. Nevertheless we have hung the wet stuff outside on the trees, because here in the tent it would only start to stink.

Jupe found two dry T-shirts and two half-dry shorts in the depths of his backpack. Since my stuff is completely clammy, I now wear Jupiter-Jones pants to sleep and finally know how fat he really is. Fortunately I have a second set of contact lenses with me, otherwise I would have been walking around with one eye blurry for the rest of the trip.

Of course, we all wonder what that thing on the mountain was today. Jupe, who always wants a logical explanation, claims that it was a human being. He doesn't want to see that this explanation is really without logic. What would a person be doing up there? How can he float in the air and shine white? And why? And that terrible howling is not a sound that a person is capable of.

Pete thinks it was an animal. But the only animal of that size that lives here in the mountains is a bear. And it couldn't possibly have been a bear. Not to mention that bears seldom venture into areas where there is no protection by trees.

I don't know what to believe. I just know I've never been so scared in my life. And I never want to see that thing again. But we all agree on one thing—what the creature wanted us to do was to disappear. Its howling was a threat. And when it came at us, it wasn't an attack, it wanted to scare us away—which it succeeded in doing quite brilliantly.

Outside it is pitch dark now. We have eaten up our last supplies, which at least makes the backpacks lighter tomorrow, but I am still hungry. Inside the tent it is warm, because I write in the light of a candle, which I wisely took with me to save the batteries of the flashlight.

I would like to keep the candle burning all night. I hope no one reads this diary but myself. I'm terribly afraid this thing is going to come back. There's nothing out there but the forest and the meadow and the mountain and the clouds. We're all alone here in the absolute wilderness. If something happens, we're in big trouble. We can't get help because the next village is who knows how far away. We can't defend ourselves and we can't hide. I think this is going to be a terrible night.

The others are not getting any better. Pete is incredibly nervous and even Jupe can tell that he would prefer to be at home in his bed and curse himself because of this stupid walking route. Pete just pointed out to me that a tent illuminated from the inside probably looks like a huge lantern from outside. If someone—or something—should be looking for us, he—or it—will find us easily. So I'd better turn off the light and try to sleep, although I'm sure I won't be able to do so anytime soon.

“Now turn off the lights, Bob,” Pete said irritably. “That stupid travel diary won't do you any good if you...” He fell silent.

“What is it?” Bob asked.

“I think I heard something,” whispered Pete.

“Where?” Jupiter mumbled.

“Well, out there, of course. Where else?” The Second Investigator blew out the candle and listened. For minutes, they hardly dared breathe.

“There was nothing,” Jupiter finally said. “Now don't panic! Try to sleep. The sun will shine tomorrow and everything will be fine.”

“I hope you're right.” Bob turned around, closed his eyes and tried to heed Jupiter's advice. Actually, he was dog-tired... and exhausted. But the ground under the tent was uneven, he was hungry and he just could not relax. As soon as he tried to give in to the tiredness, he had that horrible howling in his ears again. And immediately he saw the phantom-like figure before him and how it suddenly came towards him.

Bob turned around and listened to the breaths of the others. They were fast. Jupiter and Pete did not sleep either. All three knew that none of them could close an eye. Still, no one broke the silence, because as soon as someone started talking about it again, fear would just creep back into them.

Bob didn't know how long he had to lie there awake and motionless when he suddenly heard something. It was a soft crackling sound! It's as if someone is walking through the forest far away.

Yeah, those were footsteps. And they were getting closer!

4. Sleepless

At the moment everyone was sitting up in the tent.

“Do you hear that?” whispered Pete. “Someone is coming.”

Snap! Snap! Crack! With each step the noise became louder.

“It... it’s coming right here! What are we gonna do? What—” Pete whispered.

“Shh!” Jupiter hissed. “For goodness’ sake, be quiet, Pete!”

No one moved. No one made a sound. Everyone listened spellbound to the steps that made their way through the forest. Straight towards them.

Snap! Snap! Crack!

“It knows we’re here,” Pete whispered, barely audible. “It’s looking for us!”

Jupiter gave the Second Investigator a light shot in the ribs. “Stop it! No one knows we’re here! And if you keep quiet, no one will know! It’s pitch dark outside, someone would have to stumble across our tent to—”

“Shut up now!” whispered Bob.

Snap! Snap! Crack! The steps were now very close. Then suddenly it was quiet. Whoever was out there, he had stopped.

Pete opened his eyes as if he tried to penetrate the tent wall with his gaze. Was there a sound? Breathing, maybe? The footsteps had stopped at most five metres from their tent. There was something lying in wait outside! It was waiting for them to make a sound, then...

Snap! Snap! Crack!

It went on—past their tent, trying to be quiet and careful now. And very, very close. Then the steps slowly moved away. The crackling became quieter and quieter. The Three Investigators listened to the sound for a long time and only after five minutes of absolute silence did they dare to breathe again.

“It saw us.” Pete was convinced. “It discovered our tent and was waiting for us to come out. And then, disappointed, it took off.”

“It?” asked Jupiter. “What are you talking about, Pete?”

“You know damn well! That creature that chased us off that mountain today! The phantom!”

“The phantom couldn’t possibly have done it,” Jupiter said.

“So? And why not?” Pete asked.

“Because it was floating through the air, if I remember correctly,” Jupiter explained. “Whoever that was out there, there’s no way he was floating.”

“How immensely reassuring, Jupiter Jones!” Pete quipped. “It wasn’t the phantom, because it was floating! Do you have any idea what you’re saying?”

“Please calm down,” Bob said almost pleadingly. “Every further word just gives me goose bumps! We should be glad it’s gone!”

“It could come back at any time, Bob,” Pete said. “I won’t sleep a wink tonight.”

“I probably won’t either. But we can at least try,” Bob suggested.

They lay down again, stared at the tent ceiling and listened out into the night.

“Tell me,” Pete began after a while.

“Yeah?” Bob said.

“What do you say we cut this trip short tomorrow?”

“Abort?” Bob wondered.

“Yeah. Back to the car and go home. Even if nothing happens now—my nerves are shot. I can’t stand another night in this tent.”

“But we won’t make it to the car park in one day,” Bob said.

“We could walk to the nearest town tomorrow and take a taxi.”

“I don’t know if my foot can take it. How far is it to the next town, Jupe?”

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow, okay? I told you, tomorrow the sun will shine and everything will be fine. I’m really tired now.”

“You’ve got some nerve,” Pete grumbled, but he too turned to the side and tried to relax when he couldn’t sleep. But he caught himself listening again and again and imagining that he actually heard something.

Then Jupiter started snoring next to him. The boy had actually fallen asleep! But somehow the First Investigator’s monotonous breathing had a calming effect, because after Pete had passed a hundred counting the snores, he also felt the tiredness slowly taking over. And with the thought of home in safe Rocky Beach, he finally fell asleep.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Suddenly Pete was awake.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Damn it, Pete!” cried Bob angrily. “Five minutes ago, I finally fell asleep! That’s your alarm clock again!”

“I’m sorry! I—”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Great, Pete. Guess we won’t be sleeping tonight, huh?” Jupiter said.

“Imagine coming from you, Jupe. You were snoring like a madman,” Pete said.

“Me? Couldn’t be.”

“Well, hello.”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Now turn that thing off!” Jupiter demanded.

“I’m on it.” This time Pete found the alarm clock faster. “Sorry. That fall down the hill, it must have turned on again.”

“Well, just don’t set it for three o’clock at night anymore, that would help us all.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s okay. It won’t happen again.”

Suddenly a muffled rumble sounded and the ground under their tent shook.

“What is that?” cried Pete in panic.

“Earthquake!” Bob exclaimed.

“Again?” Pete remarked.

The quake did not last long. For a moment, the earth vibrated, then the rumbling ebbed and everything was quiet again. Only a few birds fluttered up in the trees of the nearby forest.

Pete’s heart calmed down again. Tired, he drove his hand through his face. “What a night! First these steps in the forest and now an earthquake! The second one already! If another pine cone falls on our tent now, I’ll probably have a heart attack!”

It was silent for a few moments. Then Jupiter said into the silence: “That was no earthquake.”

“Excuse me?” Bob asked. “Of course it was. A weak one, but an earthquake.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because it happened exactly twenty-four hours after the first one. Thanks to Pete’s alarm clock, which woke us both times shortly before, we can say this with a fair degree of certainty. And an earthquake that is based on time is a bit odd, don’t you think?”

“Hmm,” Bob thought. “That’s not entirely true. Yesterday it took us a lot longer to find that stupid alarm clock. So today the quake came a few minutes earlier.”

“You got that right,” Jupiter said. “It’s strange, though. And it felt kind of wrong, too. Different from what I remember from Rocky Beach.”

“We’re not in Rocky Beach,” Pete said. “Come on, we’ve been through enough today. I don’t need an earthquake that isn’t an earthquake.”

Bob’s travel diary:

So all in all, last night was one big disaster.

After the earthquake (of which Jupe still claims this morning that it was none at all), it also started to rain. The drops pelted in a crazy volume on our tent roof and Pete of course got into a crisis because he could not hear any possibly approaching steps. I was not well either and didn’t fall asleep immediately. Eventually I only got about two hours of sleep.

Right at sunrise, we got up. Luckily the rain stopped, but our clothes, which we had hung outside to dry, are even wetter than before, because last night nobody dared to go out and bring the clothes in.

So the only dry item of clothing for me is the extra-large shorts from Jupe, which are three sizes too big. Great. I’m beginning to detest this vacation. Besides, the sun isn’t shining, although Jupe had promised it would. Instead, yesterday’s events seem unreal and strangely far away today.

Did we maybe just drive each other crazy? Was it just a bear or a human? And that crack last night might have been a raccoon or something. Through the tent wall, noises sometimes sound much louder than they actually are. I do not know.

Pete is making tea, the last thing we have left, and Jupe is looking for a way out of this mess on the map.

Of course, Green Valley is still as far away as it was yesterday, and we can hardly do that in a day. But Jupe has found a house, which is maybe two hours away from here at a lake on the other side of the mountain. We don’t know who lives there, but maybe the residents are kind enough to dry our clothes and sell us some food. Or call a taxi so that we can get out of here... if that’s still our plan. Pete didn’t bring up the subject today, and I’m pretty unsure what I want anyway. We’ll see.

Shortly after, The Three Investigators set off.

Bob noticed that the pain in his foot was increasing with every step. “I’m sorry, folks, but I’m not gonna make it very far today. I’m not going to make it all the way to Green Valley.”

“Okay. Then we’ll try to reach the house by the lake,” Jupiter decided.

“I hope someone lives there,” Pete said gloomily. “After all, it’s just a dot on the map of trails. Could be anything. An old cow barn, maybe.”

“A cow barn with a lake view? Nah, definitely not,” Jupiter said. “This is definitely a villa of some rich codger who is looking for solitude, but is happy about every visit. He’ll invite us for an old-fashioned meal and we’ll sleep in four-poster beds in the guest wing!”

“Oh, yes! I’m starving,” Bob said. “Come on!”

It was about two hours to the lake. Bob gritted his teeth. He wanted to get out of his wet clothes as quickly as possible and get something to eat. Nothing else mattered to him. They found their original route, which was along the foot of the mountain. Then there was a small patch of forest, followed by a primeval landscape. At its end, the lake lay like a huge slab of lead, grey and motionless.

Bob stopped for a moment to give his foot a rest. He looked around. Behind them lay the coniferous forest, above which the mountain rose majestically like a grey-green wall and disappeared into the dark clouds. All around them grew grass, heather and wild flowers. And before them was the mountain lake, but it did not glisten promisingly in the breaking sun as Bob had wished, but nestled itself quietly and gloomily like a lurking predator in the valley.

“There it is,” cried Pete, who, as always, was a step ahead.

And now Bob saw it too. It was indeed no cow barn. But unfortunately, it was not a villa either, but a simple two-storey farmhouse made of dark stone. The roof was covered with brown, stained and half-broken bricks and slightly crooked, the windows were like black eye sockets. The house lay completely lonely and deserted near the lake shore, only a narrow path led to it, but Bob saw no car. A small rowboat was tied to a wooden stake, that was all.

This was probably the loneliest place to live in the world... and the least inviting. Although the location by the lake was beautiful, the house itself seemed so gloomy that Bob's anticipation of a warm, safe place suddenly disappeared. He suddenly had no good feeling at all. It had been a stupid idea to come here—a very stupid idea. But they had no choice.

5. The Legend of the Phantom

After Jupiter had knocked on the heavy oak door, it took a while until something stirred inside the house. Slow steps approached, then the door swung open squeaking and an elderly woman looked at the three boys in surprise. Her grey hair was chin-length and dishevelled. She was wearing grey work clothes and rough shoes. Her round face was friendly, but at the moment, she was just staring at The Three Investigators in amazement. Jupiter thought he saw a hint of fear in her eyes flaring up.

“Excuse me,” he said quickly. “We don’t mean to disturb you, but... we’ve been on a hike for three days and we’ve been through quite a lot. And then we saw this house and thought perhaps you would be kind enough to sell us some food. The next village is quite a distance away and my friend here is injured and...”

“Good gracious!” the woman cried and slowly got her surprise under control. “You gave me a terrible fright! No one hardly ever strays into this lonely area. When you knocked, I thought my husband had forgotten his key. Then suddenly three earth spirits appeared at my door.”

“Earth spirits?” Pete asked confusedly.

“Well, look at you! You look terrible! Weak, wet and dirty. Where have you been walking? Through the swamp?”

“No, we are... we had a few little problems,” Jupiter said with a smile.

“Well, come in, come in! You have to get out of those wet clothes. And eat something sensible, it seems to me. And if this is a trick and you want to attack me, then I will tell you right away—I am not as defenceless as I look. And my husband will be back any minute.”

“Don’t worry, ma’am. We are completely harmless,” assured Jupiter.

“I’m Joanna Masterson,” she said, shaking hands with them one by one.

“Jupiter Jones,” Jupiter said and followed her inviting gesture into the house. “And these are my friends Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews.”

“Welcome to Lakeview!”

Directly behind the entrance door was a large, comfortable kitchen-cum-living room, dominated by a huge oak table. In one corner was the kitchenette, in another, the fireplace.

Jupiter immediately felt himself taken back decades. He thought of long, dark winter evenings in a time when there were no computers or televisions and the family sat together at this large table in the glow of the crackling fireplace and read to each other from leather-bound books. And indeed, he discovered neither computer nor television, but a big, old, dark bookshelf. In this room, time seemed to have stopped. There were two doors to the adjoining rooms and on the back wall, two stairs leading to the basement and the attic.

“On the radio, they said that with the sunshine, it’ll be a few more days. If you want, you can stay here until tomorrow and move into the small attic. There’s not much room there, but it’s more than you’d get in a tent.”

Surprised, Jupiter turned around. “Excuse me? Are you serious?”

Mrs Masterson was smiling. “Of course. We’re always open to guests, you know. Right now, our daughter is here, too. She’s gone to the village with my husband to do some shopping. And Mr Falkner... he’s still sleeping. He always goes to bed very late. But the

smaller room is still empty. You'd have to share the bathroom with all of us, though. We have plenty of food."

"That sounds great, Mrs Masterson! How much would a night like this cost?"

She waved. "Don't worry about it. I'll make you a special price. It gets so lonely up here in the mountains, I'm always happy to have guests. You can stay as long as you want."

The First Investigator turned to his friends. "What do you think?"

"A dry sleeping place and running water—it sounds like paradise!" Bob thought.

Pete nodded. "I'm in."

"All right, Mrs Masterson. We accept your invitation with thanks."

"Fine. Now I'll show you the room."

The top floor was low and the room was small, but that didn't bother The Three Investigators at all. There were two beds and enough room for another sleeping bag on the floor. It was more than they had dreamed of this morning.

Mrs Masterson prepared a fantastic second breakfast for them with scrambled eggs, ham sandwich and hot tea and when The Three Investigators had eaten their fill and had a long hot shower, they retired to their room, lay down and fell asleep almost instantly.

Bob's travel diary:

Even if it looks creepy and off-putting from the outside, Lakeview is an oasis. I can't tell you how happy I am that we came here. Here it is dry and warm and we have enough food! We slept almost the whole day. No wonder.

When we woke up, the sun was setting. So we will stay at least until tomorrow. And if I have my way, even longer. Anyway, my foot's gonna take a little while to recover. And I don't feel like hiking much anymore. Mrs Masterson was kind enough to wash and dry our dirty, wet clothes. Now we look like people again, not like 'Earth Spirits'. It's wonderful!

We got up in time for dinner and got to know the other residents of the house—Mr Masterson is a somewhat quiet but nice man with a bald head and a beer gut. He and his wife moved to Lakeview in the solitude of the mountains a few years ago when he retired, because Mrs Masterson has asthma and the doctor strongly recommended that she move from the polluted city to the clean, clear mountain air. She has been much better since then, Mrs Masterson tells us again and again. I had the impression that she was talking about her situation in a nice way. I can't imagine anyone being happy up here in the long run. Sure, the landscape is beautiful, but also damn dark, at least when it rains. And it's lonely. The nearest neighbours live in Green Valley, which is quite a distance away.

To make life a little more varied, the Mastersons rent out the room upstairs—to Mr Falkner, for example. Mr Falkner is in his late 30s, and is a writer, and probably quite proud of it. He's been coming here every summer for years, working undisturbed on a new book. I have never heard of him (let alone read his books), neither have the others, but we didn't let him know, otherwise he would have been offended. Most of the time he writes at night, and that's why he was still asleep at noon today. He's probably quite well-read, at least he boasts quite a bit about his knowledge about this area, about the lake (which is a reservoir, by the way—Lakeview gets its electricity from it) and about all kinds of other things. Just the right person to talk to Jupe. But otherwise he is quite nice.

And then there's Sarah, the Mastersons' daughter. She studies sports in Chicago and always visits her parents for a few weeks in the summer. She is also quite nice and is having a lively conversation with Pete about athletics.

For dinner, we had a great vegetable stew and afterwards everybody just sat down and talked. I have retired a bit to continue my travel diary. It's already eleven o'clock, I think the Masterson family is getting tired, but the three of us are of course a bit out of rhythm and wide awake. And so is Mr Falkner.

By the way, we only told the others a fraction of what really happened. Jupe has once again emphatically impressed upon us not to say a word about the eerie, floating creature in the fog, nightly visitors and mysterious earthquakes. He will first try to find out more about these mountains and everything else. I think Mr Falkner is the right man to ask.

"What are you writing all the time, Bob?" asked Mr Falkner.

Bob closed the book and sat up in his chair. "A travel diary."

"For school?"

"No, for myself. No particular reason... I just like writing."

"I suppose you want to be a writer someday?" asked Mr Falkner and gave him a patronizing smile.

Bob spoke up. "No. Probably a journalist, or something along this line." He considered making a snide remark about being a writer, but decided against it.

"So, have you experienced anything exciting on your hike that you could perhaps make a novel out of one day?" Falkner followed up as if he hadn't even considered Bob's career aspirations.

"Well..." Bob started and gave Jupiter a look, looking for help.

"Not really," the First Investigator stepped in. "Aside from sprained ankles, rain and hunger, what could you possibly experience here in the mountains?"

"Well. You were on Fog Mountain, after all. You might have encountered the phantom of Fog Mountain, for example."

Pete, who had just had a sip of tea, choked and splashed everything across the table.

"Excuse me!" he shouted, running red. "Sorry, I... I guess it was still too hot. I'll clean it up real quick."

Pete got up so fast that the chair flipped over and went to the sink to get a cloth. In a hurry, he wiped the table clean. Everyone else tried hard to ignore what had happened.

"Phantom of the fog?" asked Jupiter, without a trace. "What's that all about? I've never heard of it."

"Oh, there's a lot of legends around this mountain," Mr Falkner explained. "Did you know that its peak is invisible for more than three hundred days a year because it lies in the clouds? That's how the mountain got its name."

"It has nothing to do with a phantom. It's just geography," Mr Masterson surly interjected. "If the wind is northerly, the clouds will be blown from the surrounding mountains over here. They get stuck on Fog Mountain and go no further. That's why we get so much rain in these parts."

"But there's still something to this phantom story, Jack," said his wife. "The people down in the village go on and on about it."

"They're just superstitious peasants, Joanna," Mr Masterson said. "Nothing else happens out here. Probably it was someone on a hike up there and the fog and coldness gave them visual hallucinations of an apparition in the fog. Then the people made up the story of a mysterious white phantom roaming the mountain, chasing innocent hikers from its peak."

"It certainly wasn't like that," Mr Falkner contradicted and sat up straight in order to draw full attention to himself. "In fact, the legend of the phantom of Fog Mountain is closely

tied to this house—the house of Richard Ashford. He built it and lived here until his mysterious disappearance some sixty years ago.”

“Who was this Ashford?” Jupiter asked curiously.

“He was a young adventurer who lived in the area. At a young age, he made one mistake after another. He was a bar owner, hotelier and even had a laundry business at one time, but he was not a very good businessman. Everything he touched was ruined sooner or later... usually sooner. In a short time, he was in deep debt. The bank stopped giving him money, so he went into personal debt. Until one day, by chance, he discovered a vein of gold in the mountains.”

“Gold?” echoed Pete. “Here?”

“Yes. Ashford may have been a rotten businessman, but he had a kind of sixth sense when it came to tracking down unusual sources of finance.

“But to mine the gold, he needed money. His creditors wouldn’t give him any more. Until he once again got into a bad deal with one of them—he promised him half of the profit from the gold mine. In return, his lender initially advanced him the sum he needed to hire workers, dig the tunnels and mine the gold. Ashford built this house to oversee the mining operations on Fog Mountain. But after only a few months, the mine was no longer yielding any gold; the gold vein had been smaller than he had hoped. Still, he did not give up.

“He was sure to come across a second vein. So he kept digging and digging, and the mine kept getting bigger and bigger and swallowing more and more money. But despite his best efforts, he never found more gold. Finally, he had to give up. In the end, he lost more money than he gained. The mine was closed. He could never pay off his debts.”

“And then what happened to him?” Bob asked.

“His recent failure had made him so depressed that he retreated to this house and only rarely showed his face in the village. It was said that he was hatching a new business idea. Others claimed that he never stopped looking for a new vein of gold. But there was one thing everyone agreed on—Ashford was slowly but surely going crazy. He was so obsessed with making the big money that nothing else mattered to him. And then one day he disappeared.” Mr Falkner took a dramatic pause for effect.

“What do you mean by disappear?”

Mr Falkner continued: “That he no longer appeared in the village... or anywhere else. Nobody saw him anymore. And weeks later, when someone finally came to check on him, he found the house empty. Ashford had disappeared. No one knew where. People assumed that he had secretly disappeared from the area to try his luck elsewhere.

“Years went by and Ashford was forgotten. But one day, a lonely wanderer had an eerie encounter on Fog Mountain. He saw a ghostly figure hovering over the wet meadows and emitting terrible wailing sounds. The hiker told the village about it. At first no one wanted to believe him, but then more and more people saw the phantom, and finally the rumour spread that it was Ashford’s ghost who had returned to Fog Mountain because he was still hoping to find gold. Meanwhile, no local people dared to climb the summit.

“The fog is the magic limit, nobody dares to go beyond it. And strangers rarely stray this way. But when it did happen and an ignorant person crossed the fog line, it was not uncommon for him to appear in the village shortly afterwards, half mad with fear, and tell of his sinister encounter with the phantom. Fog Mountain is cursed, everyone in the area knows that. Anyone who gets too close to the fog is no longer safe.”

The Three Investigators had listened to Mr Falkner with eyes wide open and mouths half open. A log cracked in the fire and Pete flinched.

“You see, Jack,” said Mrs Masterson in a low voice. “There’s something to the stories. That’s why nobody wanted this house for years. They are all afraid of Ashford’s ghost! And I know you don’t want to hear this, Jack, but they’re scared of us too. People in the village are avoiding us because we moved up here.”

“Nonsense, Joanna, these are all old wives’ tales!”

“I don’t know, Dad,” Sarah said. “When we were at Green Valley earlier, I also had the feeling that people are still suspicious, even though you’ve lived here for so many years.”

“I take advantage of the eerie atmosphere of this place to incorporate it into my books,” said Mr Falkner. “But I couldn’t live here in the long run. When I imagine that the fog sometimes creeps down to the lake and the phantom is very close by...” He didn’t go on. No one said anything else.

Suddenly, something thumped against the window!

6. Scary Stories

Jupiter, Pete and Bob flinched, Sarah let out a little scream. They all stared at the window. It was dark outside. Nothing could be seen. Nobody moved, nobody said a word. Then the First Investigator quietly pushed his chair back, stood up and slowly walked towards the window.

In the mountains, there were no street lamps, no neighbouring houses, not the slightest source of light. And the sky was so overcast that even the moon and the stars could not be seen. Only the light that fell through the window from inside illuminated the darkness a little.

Jupiter approached the window. He saw his own reflection. And the distorted rectangle of light and his own outline on the lawn in front of the house. Nothing else.

Suddenly a shadow jumped from the side towards the window and slammed against the glass. Jupiter backed off. Then he breathed a sigh of relief. “The shutter. It must have become quite windy. It broke free and smashed against the window.”

Mr Masterson laughed out loud. “Gotcha! I knew it was the shutter. It’s been flapping all over the place. I’ve got to get it fixed. But it was fun watching you guys getting a fright of your lives.”

“Dad!” cried Sarah in indignation, poking her father in the side.

“Enough with the ghost stories for tonight,” Mrs Masterson decided. “We’re gonna go to sleep. You can sit down here as long as you want. We don’t mind.”

The Masterson family said good night and soon disappeared into their bedrooms. What remained were The Three Investigators and Mr Falkner, who made no attempt to go to his room.

“That was an entertaining horror story, Mr Falkner.” Jupiter played the innocent. “But what about you? Do you believe in this story yourself?”

He smiled mysteriously. “Let’s put it this way—I’d like to believe it.”

“I don’t understand,” Jupiter said.

Falkner took a deep breath. “I have a habit—whenever I travel to a place I don’t know, I try to find out about its history. But not only the history that is written in books and tourist magazines, but also about the legends of the place—about what moves the people who live there, what concerns them, what they believe in and why. I am interested in the question of how much a place influences the people who live there—and vice versa. I want truthfulness in my stories. And for that I need real people, places and contexts as role models.”

Jupiter wasn’t sure if he understood what Falkner was trying to say.

“Fog Mountain is a mysterious, dark place. But the question is—would it be so even if there were no people to tell legends about it? Or the other way round—if the mountain did not exist, would people tell legends about something else, the lake for example? This interaction of place and people fascinates me. That’s why I’m interested in the legends of a place. And I try to believe it. Because if I can believe it, then I can understand the place better and the people who live there. Truthfulness is the most important thing in my work.”

Falkner looked at The Three Investigators as if he expected an answer.

Pete grinned, embarrassed. “I don’t think I understood a single word you said. Do you believe in the phantom or not?”

"I don't think that's important, Pete," Mr Falkner explained. "What is important is the true essence of every legend. What I believe is completely irrelevant. But do you think a legend can wrap itself around nothing? I don't mean that. And so, for me, it's clear that Fog Mountain is surrounded by mystery. I just don't know what kind."

"We have seen the phantom," Jupiter suddenly said.

Bob and Pete stared at him stunned. Pete's mouth opened, then closed it again without saying anything. But Jupiter remained unmoved. He watched Falkner. The writer also seemed surprised, but Jupiter tried to see behind his reaction. He did not succeed.

"Really?" Falkner finally said.

"Yes. Yesterday. We were lost on Fog Mountain, and then it suddenly appeared. We were running away and Bob sprained his ankle. That's how we came to this house in the first place." Jupiter gave the author a challenging look. "What do you think?"

Mr Falkner looked from one to the other for a long time, then suddenly a grin spread over his face and finally he started to laugh. "I think you want to take revenge for the fact that I just gave you such a fright. But I am innocent! After all, I couldn't do anything about the shutter!"

Bob and Pete joined in the laughter. It sounded artificial. Only Jupiter did not laugh.

"Okay, guys, I'm gonna get back to work now," Mr Falkner said. He got out of his chair and went towards the stairs. "Have a nice evening. And don't let the phantom get you!" He winked at them and disappeared upstairs.

The Three Investigators waited until they heard his room door close. Then Pete started in a muffled voice: "What was that all about, Jupe? Are you crazy?"

"Yes!" Bob joined in. "Hadn't you inculcated in us not to say a word about our encounter?"

"I admit I followed a spontaneous inspiration, the consequences of which I could not yet foresee. But I had the feeling that Falkner was hiding something from us."

"What makes you think so?" Bob asked.

"Didn't you find his talk kind of weird?" Jupiter said.

"Weird?" Pete asked. "Sure. But I can also tell you why—Falkner is just a strange guy. And he likes to hear himself talk, especially if it's some weird writer stuff. He's an artist or at least he thinks he is."

"I rather had the impression that he was playing with us," Jupiter contradicted. "He suspected that we were hiding something from him. So he also didn't say anything about what we actually wanted to know. So that's why I revealed."

"It worked out great," Pete remarked mockingly.

"Yes," Jupiter admitted with a crunch. "The success of the action unfortunately left much to be desired."

"I think," Bob interjected, "we should think about something else entirely. We know now that we really saw a phantom on that mountain. The question is, how do we get out of here as quickly as possible?"

"Fellas..." Jupiter began.

"We could ask Mr Masterson if he could give us a lift into the village," Pete suggested.

"Fellas..." Jupiter repeated.

"Maybe there's a bus that'll take us back to the car..."

"Fellas..." Jupiter tried to put in a word for the third time.

"... Otherwise, I'd be willing to spend the money on a taxi," Bob said. "With my foot, I can't possibly—"

"Hey!"

Bob and Pete flinched. "What are you yelling for?"

"We're not going anywhere!"

The sentence hung ominously in the room for several seconds. It was like an order... or a threat.

Then Pete cried: "Oh no, Jupiter Jones. We will get out of here! I know, you caught the fire again. The phantom of Fog Mountain! It's just perfect for your demented, twisted mind, isn't it? You can't wait to solve the mystery of this phantom! Have you forgotten about our encounter with it yesterday? You ran away screaming!"

"Pete," Jupiter said calmly. "There are no phantoms. You know that as well as I do."

"No. I don't know. I saw one yesterday. We all did. And you can tell me a hundred times that there's no such thing as ghosts... but that was one!"

"Even if you're right, Pete, and this really was a supernatural apparition, then this is a pressing argument to stay here and get to the bottom of it. A proof of the existence of a supernatural phenomenon would be of immense interest! We must—"

"Oh, stop your pompous talk, Juve! I don't want to stay here. And neither does Bob. You can pursue your endeavours all you want, but I'm leaving."

Suddenly the light flickered. There was an electrical hiss. Then the kitchen lamp went out and The Three Investigators sat in the dark.

"What's wrong now?" Bob asked and whispered involuntarily.

"Power failure," Jupiter said. "It should happen now and then. Does anyone have a lighter handy?"

Bob rummaged in his trousers pocket and shortly after, he let a small flame light up.

"I'm sure there are candles around here somewhere," Jupiter said. "Look in the drawer there, Pete."

A little later, they had found a small candle residue, which now sparsely lit the kitchen table. The table suddenly looked much bigger than before, as did the entire room. The glow of fire flickered away in the darkness and The Three Investigators automatically moved closer to the candle.

"Don't panic," said Jupiter, who had noticed how restless Pete and Bob had become. "It's just a power outage, nothing more."

"Shh!" hissed Pete. "I think I hear something." They listened. Something creaked near them.

"Those are footsteps," whispered Bob. "Someone is in this house!"

Now it was unmistakable. Someone came down the stairs. The Three Investigators stared over at the steps, which were in deep shadows. Then a pair of legs appeared.

"Thank goodness you found candles," said Mr Falkner, who carefully groped his way through the darkness. "Do you know what's going on here?"

"Power failure," all three said as if from one mouth and sighed in relief.

Falkner noticed this and grinned. "Well, did you take me for the phantom?"

"To be honest, yes," Pete confessed. "This story is really scary."

"But it's just a story, isn't it?" Falkner replied mysteriously and sat down at the table with them.

"Luckily, my laptop automatically switched to battery operation when the power was gone, otherwise I would have lost the work I did tonight. But it shouldn't last long. In the meantime, I can't work without light anyway."

"Mrs Masterson told us that the house gets its electricity from the power station at the reservoir," Bob said. "Do you think there's been a failure?"

“That may well be,” replied Falkner. “I’ve been here often in recent years. Power failures are a regular occurrence. The Mastersons must then have someone from the village come to repair the damage. So tonight we won’t get any more power.”

“Great,” Pete said gloomily. “This really does get better and better.”

“I find it cosy,” Jupiter said and bent over the candle flame, so that the flickering light distorted his facial features to a creepy grimace. He lowered his voice to an eerie whisper. “Alone and alone in the middle of the Rocky Mountains... at the foot of Fog Mountain, the scene of ancient legends...”

“In a house that once belonged to the man whose spirit haunts the mountain. Three frightened hikers are stranded here in the middle of solitude. They have sought refuge in this house and have no idea that this was their greatest mistake.” Jupiter smiled diabolically.

“Stop it, Jupe!” Pete demanded.

Falkner laughed. “You forgot the mysterious writer who behaves very strangely, Jupiter.”

“Thanks for the hint,” Jupiter replied and bent over the flame again. “Late in the evening, when the other occupants of the house have gone to bed, the three wanderers sit unsuspectingly in the kitchen and talk about the phantom, when suddenly—” Jupiter struck the table loudly with his flat hand so that the others—including Mr Falkner—flinched. “—When suddenly the power goes out! Only the faint glow of a tiny candle, which will soon burn out, illuminates the inside of the house, while outside, the night is getting darker and darker. Fog rises and becomes thicker and thicker. Slowly it creeps towards the house and envelops it on all sides.”

Unwillingly Pete looked at the window—and was startled! “Hey!”

Now it was the First Investigator who flinched from fright. “What is it?” he asked angrily.

With a slightly shaking hand, Pete pointed outside. Outside the window there was no more a deep dark night, but grey fog shimmered eerily in the faint candlelight. “How did you know about the fog?”

Jupiter swallowed. “I did not know. I just thought it would fit into the story quite well.”

“The creature surpasses the creator and continues to spin its own story,” Mr Falkner said mysteriously.

“How philosophical,” Jupiter remarked. He stood up, stepped up to the window and looked out. “What a soup out there! You can’t see beyond five metres.”

“It’s dark,” Bob remarked. “Yes. But it’s not dark at night, it’s foggy dark.”

Now the others came to the window and looked outside. Then they understood what Jupiter meant. The darkness was no longer midnight dark and endless, but grey and wadded. And it ended only a few metres from the window. They could not see beyond that.

“It comes through the lake,” explained Mr Falkner. “Where there are lots of water, there are lots of fog. Mrs Masterson told me that in winter sometimes you can hardly see anything for days.”

“Creepy,” Pete said uneasily. “Shouldn’t we just go to bed?”

“You couldn’t sleep anyway,” said Bob.

“True. I just got up a few hours ago,” Pete said. “So I guess that means we’re just gonna sit here in the dark all night, huh? And the candle won’t burn long.”

“I’m sure we can find another one,” Jupiter reassured him. “Now, don’t panic, Pete. It’s only fog out there! Small water droplets floating in the air... harmless.” Jupiter returned to the table. “Would anyone like more tea?”

Suddenly Bob flinched.

“What is it, Bob?” Pete asked.

“I think I saw something.”

Pete took a step back from the window. “W... what?”

“I don’t know. Something flashed past the window... I think.” Bob stared intently at the darkness. Nothing.

He breathed again. “Maybe I was wrong.”

“It seems to me that your nerves are a bit strained at the moment,” Jupiter said. “I’ll see if I can find a calming tea in the cupboard.”

“Oh yes!” cried Pete. “Please.”

Mr Falkner turned with his back to the window and laughed softly. “You really are the most amusing company I ever had during my stays at Lakeview. I think—”

Wham!

Behind Falkner something slammed against the window pane! It was definitely not a shutter.

This time, it was a white hand bent into a claw!

7. The Phantom Strikes

Mr Falkner spun around. The Three Investigators were screaming. Then the hand was gone.

"Did you see that?" cried Pete and kept retreating. "Did you see that?"

"What was that?" Falkner asked excitedly and pressed his face against the window.

"Get away from there, Mr Falkner," Bob warned, reaching for Falkner's shoulder.

"I want to know what that was. I just saw something white and then it was gone."

"It was a hand," Pete replied in a high-pitched voice. "Did you see it? It was a hand, wasn't it?"

The First Investigator nodded dazedly. "Yes. I saw a hand, too."

"A hand?" Mr Falkner gasped. "You've got to be kidding me!"

"No! There really was a hand," cried Pete, who had retreated to the other side of the room in the meantime. "It struck the window and—"

Wham!

"Aaaaah!" Pete took a leap forward. Right behind him, something hit another window!

"What was that, Juve, what was that?"

"The hand again," Jupiter answered in a husky voice.

"This time I saw it too," said Falkner. "Who is that out there?"

"The phantom!" breathed Pete and his gaze went from one window to the next. "It came through the fog!"

"Nonsense!" Falkner contradicted and looked out the window again.

"Be careful, Mr Falkner!" Pete said anxiously. "It could shatter the glass and reach for you!"

"You've seen too many horror movies, kid."

"Are you sure? It seems like it," Pete said.

"Somebody's out there sneaking around making fools out of us," Mr Falkner said.

"You're not going out there, are you?" Pete asked in horror.

Falkner did not answer, but stared silently into the night. "There's nothing to see. Damned fog! The guy could stand three metres in front of me and I wouldn't recognize him."

"What makes you think it's a guy?" Jupiter asked.

"I don't care if it's a woman. But certainly not a phantom."

In the meantime, Jupiter and Bob had joined Pete in the middle of the room, as far away as possible from the windows and the door.

"We must do something!" Pete urged. "Call the police!"

"The police?" Jupiter laughed. "Pete, this is no man's land! The police won't come in the middle of the night in this fog just because someone knocked on the window."

For a while, they listened in silence. Outside, nothing moved.

"Maybe we were wrong," Bob whispered. "It could have been an animal. Maybe a bird that flew into the window."

"Sure," Pete sneered. "And then it flew around the house once, only to crash into the window a second time on the other side."

Wham!

The hand struck the window right in front of Mr Falkner and disappeared again immediately. The writer staggered back in horror and held his breath. And then came the howling. At first, it sounded like the howling of the wind, but it quickly became louder—a scream like that of a woman in mortal fear mingled with it. It was the very same gruesome lamentation echoed through the night that The Three Investigators had heard the day before on the mountain. Icy shivers ran down their backs and Jupiter felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. This scream went through his limbs!

“W... what... what is that?” Mr Falkner stuttered and backed off until he collided with the three friends in the middle of the room.

“The phantom!” cried Pete. “It was the truth, Mr Falkner, we really saw it on the mountain! And heard the same thing!”

The scream would go on and on. Deafeningly, it screamed through the night like a siren, in ever-increasing and ever-decreasing chant.

Falkner took a determined step towards the door. “I’ll check it out!”

“No!” cried Pete. “Don’t!”

“Yes, I will. We’re about to put an end to this sordid joke. Whoever that is out there, I’ll fix him!”

The First Investigator wanted to go with him. But when he ordered his legs to move, he noticed that they were shaking like blades of grass in a storm. He could not even take a single step forward. As if rooted to the ground, he stopped and watched Falkner go to the door and open it with a jerk. In an instant, the howling became even louder. It came directly from the fog in front of the door. But there was nothing to see. Mr Falkner stopped in the door frame for a moment.

“Come out, you fool!” he shouted furiously. No response. And so Falkner stepped outside into the fog. The Three Investigators saw him take three more steps, then the darkness swallowed him.

Now finally they dared to move away from the middle of the room. They went to the door and peered out. The dark grey fog received them like an impenetrable wall. There was already nothing more to be seen of Falkner, only the howling did not stop.

“Mr Falkner!” cried Jupiter. “Are you still there?”

“Yes, Jupiter!” was the prompt answer. “In this cursed fog you can’t even see your hand in front of your face! I, uh... aaaaargh!”

The phantom’s howl swelled up. Falkner screamed. There was a thud. Then the howling died down. Jupiter stared out into the fog in horror. Then he looked at Bob and Pete. Both were deathly pale.

“Mr Falkner?” Jupiter called out.

No answer.

“The phantom... has got him,” Pete stammered.

“We have to help him!” Bob cried, but he didn’t move. He had the feeling that if he stepped over the threshold, he would be helpless against the phantom. This house was like a small fortress—a tiny island in a sea of fog and darkness, in which terrible creatures lived and were only waiting for someone to step over the magical threshold. If he went out there now, he would be lost—like Mr Falkner.

“Mr Falkner!” Jupiter called out again.

The horrible lamentation grew quieter and quieter, moving further and further away from them until finally it died down. A gust of wind suddenly blew through the door, tore at the candle flame and put it out. Now it was pitch dark—not the slightest spark of light was left. Even the grey of the fog had become an all devouring black.

“Goodness,” whispered Pete. “Quick, Bob, close the door!”

“But we can’t—” Bob said.

“Shut the door!” Pete cried.

Suddenly, they heard a loud bang right behind them that made them jumped up.

8. The Search for Mr Falkner

“What’s all this noise?” growled a dark voice. “I sympathise with young people, but this is really going too far!”

“Mr Masterson!” cried Bob. “Here... it was... Mr Falkner is...”

“Why is it so dark? And who was screaming so loud?” Mr Masterson asked.

“It... it was...” Pete stammered.

“Somebody turn on the lights!” Mr Masterson said.

“What’s wrong, Jack?” asked a tired voice.

“I don’t know, Joanna, don’t have a clue.”

Steps came down the stairs. “Dad? Did the power go out again? What was that horrible noise?”

It took Mrs Masterson a while to find some candles and Bob lit them with trembling hands. Jupiter closed the door and looked at the Mastersons in distraction. All three looked tired and a little angry.

Finally, Jack Masterson raised the word, “Speak up! What happened here? And where is Mr Falkner? I think he’s working nights! He can’t work at night without electricity.”

He looked at The Three Investigators in a challenging way. Jupiter cleared his throat to give his voice a firm sound. He succeeded only partially. Nevertheless, he tried to report what had happened as calmly and objectively as possible.

“The phantom?” Mr Masterson finally asked.

“I know it sounds crazy, but that’s exactly how it happened.” Jupiter couldn’t tell whether Mr Masterson believed him.

“But you didn’t see anything out there, did you?” Mr Masterson asked. “Except this... hand, I mean.”

“No, but we heard it,” Pete replied, still trembling all over his body. “And it was the same terrible howling as yesterday on the mountain.”

Now the Second Investigator reported what had happened to them on Fog Mountain. Little by little, Mr Masterson’s expression grew faint and finally there was a trace of fear in his eyes. His wife and daughter, who had been spellbound by Jupiter’s and Pete’s accounts of the events.

“Goodness, Jack! So the stories are true after all!” Mrs Masterson remarked.

“I... I don’t know.” Mr Masterson stammered.

“But we heard the howling!” Sarah said.

“We don’t know ourselves what to believe,” said Jupiter. “But Mr Falkner has disappeared. Someone or something overcame him out there and...”

“My goodness,” Pete suddenly cried. “Maybe he’s still there! He could be right outside the house! We must look for him! Maybe he’s hurt!”

“You’re right, Pete!” Bob couldn’t believe it. For some reason, they all assumed that the phantom had kidnapped Mr Falkner. It was much more likely that he was still out there. However, this meant... that they had to go outside—get out of the protective walls into the terrible fog.

"I'll get a flashlight," Mr Masterson said, got up and started digging wildly in the kitchen drawers. Soon after, he was ready.

"Please, Jack, don't go out there!" Mrs Masterson pleaded.

"You heard what the boys said, Joanna. Mr Falkner might still be there. He needs our help."

"We are all going," Jupiter decided. "If we stay close together, nothing can happen to us."

Everyone agreed with that. Mrs Masterson and Sarah put on a dressing gown, then the six of them went out into the night.

The fog welcomed them like a wet, cold hand. It soon turned out that the flashlight was of little use to them. It only made the fog glow like a spotlight that blinded them. It didn't help them see any better. So Mr Masterson shone the flashlight on the ground. At least they had a little light and could give in to the illusion that they weren't completely disoriented.

Little by little, they moved away from the house. The front door had soon been swallowed by the grey soup, only the faint glow of the candles in the windows could be seen.

"Mr Falkner!" Jupiter called out.

They took turns to call Falkner, but nobody answered. For a quarter of an hour, they searched the immediate vicinity of the house. They went down to the lake shore and just as far in the opposite direction, but they found no trace of Falkner or the phantom. Frightened, they returned to the house.

"What now?" Sarah asked anxiously.

"We'll call the police," Mrs Masterson decided.

"Joanna, shouldn't we—"

"Jack! A man is missing! We must inform the police!" Determined, she reached for the phone, lifted the receiver to her ear—and listened. She pressed the switch hook a few times. "The line's dead," she said.

"I'm not surprised," replied Jupiter.

"Excuse me?" Everyone looked at him in surprise.

"I've been thinking," Jupiter explained. "And I've come to the conclusion that the blackout is not an accident. You draw your electricity from the power plant at the reservoir. It should be child's play to manipulate the line. The same goes for the telephone cables. In a house like this, far away from any civilization, it is no big problem to find and cut the cables. Someone has systematically cut us off from the outside world."

Mrs Masterson flapped her hand in horror. "What are you saying, Jupiter?"

"That sounds logical, doesn't it? Without electricity we are limited in our possibilities of action, without telephone we cannot get help. It's the perfect situation to put us in a state of anxiety and fear. And to kidnap someone."

"You mean... the phantom cut the wires?" Pete asked incredulously.

"Yes. Except I still don't believe in a phantom."

"Really? You were trembling with fear just like the rest of us," Bob interjected.

"I didn't deny that either," Jupiter said. "Nevertheless, I do not believe the phantom is a supernatural being. Ghosts don't cut wires. Nor do they knock on windows."

"What are we going to do?" Sarah asked. "Something must be done!"

"We should go down to the village," said Pete, who did not want to stay in this house a second longer.

"Impossible," contradicted Mr Masterson. "We can't drive at night. It's quite a distance before the trail leads to a real road. In this visibility, we'd end up in a ditch after 100 metres."

"So our hands are tied tonight," Jupiter summed up. "But tomorrow morning..."

"Let's get out of here as fast as we can," Pete said to him.

"Right," Jupiter agreed.

The Mastersons did not register it, but Bob and Pete noticed the undertone with which Jupiter had said 'right' immediately.

"I suspect evil," Pete said ominously after a while. "You're up to something again, aren't you, Jupe? You're not thinking of..."

"Oh, no," said Bob, who thought exactly the same thing.

"But of course," Jupiter answered the unspoken question. "I'm not forcing anyone to come along."

"One moment..." Sarah joined the conversation. "I'm not following you right now. What's this about?"

"Jupiter wants to search for the phantom," Pete explained in his grave voice. "He wants to climb Fog Mountain."

"Excuse me?" Sarah asked.

"It's quite obvious," Jupiter explained. "All the tracks lead to this mountain. If we are to solve the mystery of the phantom, we must begin there, following the laws of logic."

"Begin there?" echoing Sarah. "But with what?"

"Well, with the investigation. Oh, that's right, I forgot." Jupiter reached into his pocket, pulled out a slightly battered business card and handed it to Sarah. It said:



Bob's travel diary:

Is this night ever going to end? I feel like I've been sitting here by candlelight for a week now. It's still pitch dark outside.

The discussion went on forever. The usual, of course—Pete declared Jupe crazy because of his plan to go to Fog Mountain, while Jupe tried to stay relaxed and explain everything logically. The Mastersons thought that the business card was a joke at first. But when Jupe, in his usual manner, began to explain theories and possible courses of action, and in the process became the spokesman for our small 'house community', they listened to him.

What has come of it? The Mastersons want to go to the village tomorrow and alert the police. Jupe tried to stop them, saying that he wanted to try to solve the secret of Fog Mountain alone before the police stood in his way. But fortunately the Mastersons did not get involved and stuck to their plan. Nor were we able to stop Jupe from his plan to go up the mountain tomorrow and search for the phantom. The problem is I cannot possibly go with him, my foot is still swollen.

And Pete doesn't want to go, of course. He's still trembling now. But we don't want to let our First Investigator go alone either. I think that will cause arguments in the morning, otherwise I don't know how I'm supposed to feel.

We're all afraid for Mr Falkner. He's out there alone now, in the fog—if he's even alive. No one dares speak out, but I'm sure we have all thought the worst of it. It sends shivers down my spine.

I think the reason we've talked about things for so long is just to distract ourselves. But one by one, we all fell asleep. Sarah was the first. She huddled on a chair in the corner and slept quietly. Mr And Mrs Masterson went back into their bedroom. Pete and Jupe talked for a long time, but now they're both asleep in their chairs.

I'm the last still awake. And I'm listening. There's nothing moving out there. But I pray that this night will be over soon! There's not yet a glimmer of dawn. The phantom has probably stolen the sun... or the world has ended and we haven't noticed. I have no idea how this nightmare will eventually turn out.

9. Departure

Bob awoke from the crackle of the fire. He opened his eyes and saw the tabletop, under his head was his diary. As he moved, every single muscle in his body ached.

Mrs Masterson leaned over the fireplace and brought a pot of water to a boil. The front door was opened. Fresh, humid air blew in. It was bright. At last!

“Good morning,” said Mrs Masterson. She looked tired and sick, and was still wearing her robe. “What a terrible night. Let me make us some strong coffee first. Jack and your friends are out looking around.”

Bob nodded and lifted himself up laboriously. He stretched his rusty limbs and stepped outside as well. The fog had cleared strongly, but it had not completely disappeared. Pale shreds were still drifting over the lake and the mountain was almost completely hiding behind murky veils.

Mr Masterson knelt in front of a small electrical box near the house and inspected the cable connections, while Jupiter and Pete searched the area around the house with their heads bowed, probably hoping to find any trace of yesterday’s incident.

“Hi,” Bob said tiredly and walked up to the First Investigator. “Anything new?”

Jupiter shook his head. “I didn’t really expect to find anything either. But we had to try.”

“So what’s your plan?” Bob asked.

“As before... I’m going up the mountain.”

“Alone?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “Looks like it.”

“Jupe, you can’t do this! It’s much too dangerous!” Bob cried. “Let’s wait one more day, then I’ll be able to walk better. Then I’ll come with you.”

“Wait another day? Bob, Mr Falkner has disappeared! Who knows if he’s even alive! We can’t wait another day! Besides, the police will be here and then we can forget our investigation.”

“And what’s the big deal?” Bob asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, Jupe. What would be so bad about leaving it to the police? Look, if you’re right and this... thing last night was not a supernatural being, then there is actually only one logical explanation—it was a crazed lunatic, a psychopath who was targeting the inhabitants of lonely mountain cabins. You’re not gonna walk into his arms, are you?”

“I don’t want to run into anybody,” Jupiter said. “I want to unlock the secret of Fog Mountain. Come on, Bob, we had this discussion for hours last night. I’ve made up my mind, I’m going up there today. If someone wants to come along, fine. If not, then I’ll go alone.”

Before Bob could say anything, Mr Masterson approached them.

“Have you found out anything?” Jupiter asked.

Jack Masterson shook his head. “Everything’s okay at the power box. Someone must have tampered with the power somewhere else. I don’t find that so easy.”

“Somebody was thorough.” Jupiter looked into the distance and pinched his lower lip slowly. “Probably there’s no point in looking for the source of the outage. The phantom will have made sure that we won’t be able to—” He fell silent.

“What is it, Jupe?” Bob asked anxiously and followed the look of the First Investigator. He looked straight over at Mr Masterson’s Jeep.

Slowly it dawned on Bob. “The car!”

“Right, Bob. The car,” Jupiter said. “Somebody cut off our electricity and phone lines because he wanted us cut off from the outside world. He’d have been pretty stupid to forget about the car.”

Mr Masterson looked at the First Investigator in amazement for a moment, then went straight for the car, ripped open the door and sat behind the wheel.

“What’s wrong with him?” asked Pete, who had come up from behind.

“You’ll see,” Jupiter said.

Mr Masterson tried to start the car. The engine howled and stuttered—and stalled. Same thing on the second try. The third time, it started. Relieved, Mr Masterson stepped on the accelerator a few times and let the engine roar—until it stalled again. And that was that. The car wouldn’t start again.

“Out of petrol!” cried Mr Masterson furiously after looking at the gauge. “But I filled the tank in the village yesterday!”

The Three Investigators approached the Jeep and Bob knelt down to look under the car. The grass was wet anyway, but under the floor panel there was a distinct smell of petrol. Then Bob spotted that long, ugly crack in the petrol tank. A shiver ran over him.

He stood up and turned to Jupiter. “What did you say, Jupe? Somebody was thorough! He damaged the petrol tank.”

Mr Masterson cursed and looked at the damage. “There’s no point rushing out to get the car repaired. It’s not worth it.”

“Don’t you have a spare canister?” Pete asked.

“Yes, I do. An empty one.”

Pete swallowed hard. Then he said in a grave voice: “Then we’re stuck here!”

It was almost noon when a decision was finally made. The Three Investigators and the Masterson family sat at the kitchen table and Jupiter summed up: “You three will go down to the village on foot. If you leave immediately, you can still make it before nightfall. There you will get help. The three of us will stay here. Better said, Bob and Pete will stay here while I look around on Fog Mountain. I’ll be back by nightfall too—hopefully with Mr Falkner.”

Pete cleared his throat. “I’m coming with you, Jupe.”

Everyone stared at him in surprise.

“Save your comments. I know what I said,” Pete said. “I will stand by it. This whole plan is one kamikaze operation. But that’s exactly why you need me, Jupe. If you’re on your own up there, you won’t even know which way is north.”

Jupiter nodded and smiled gratefully. More was not necessary. He knew exactly how difficult the decision had been for Pete. But he would return the favour later.

“And I will stay here,” Sarah suddenly announced.

Mrs Masterson flinched. “Oh, no, you’re coming with us, Sarah!”

“But there must be someone up here!” Sarah cried.

“Bob’s here,” Mr Masterson said.

“And leave him alone?” She shook her head decidedly. “I’m staying. If something happens, one of us can still get help. It’s much safer than if Bob were to stay here alone.”

“Sarah,” Bob started, “you really don’t have to do this. I can manage just fine on my own.”

The Mastersons tried to change their daughter's mind for a while, but Sarah remained stubborn. Finally, they agreed. Mrs Masterson was extremely anxious with tears streaming down her face, and Mr Masterson... he got up and went into the next room. When he came back, he had a rifle in his hand. Without a word, he handed it to Sarah.

"What am I gonna do with this?" Sarah gasped.

"Defend yourself if you have to," her father said.

"You know I can't stand these things, Dad," Sarah insisted.

"But you know how to handle it. And I said, just in case."

"Didn't you promise me you'd sell that rifle?" Sarah said.

"Now you can be glad I didn't. Do me a favour and take it. It will make us feel safer."

Sarah gave a sigh, then she carefully picked up the rifle and immediately put it in the next corner.

"We should leave, Joanna. We haven't got much time." The Masterson couple packed up their things and said goodbye.

"Be careful," Mrs Masterson said, and took her daughter in her arms to say goodbye.

"Take care of yourselves."

"We will," Sarah said.

"We'll be back tonight," promised Mr Masterson.

Then they left the house. From the window, The Three Investigators and Sarah looked at the couple walking away until they disappeared on the dirt road.

"It's best we leave right away, too," said Jupiter. "Even if you don't believe me, I have no intention of staying on the mountain any longer than necessary."

"That's just as well. I don't either," Pete said. "All right, let's go get this silly phantom! I want to go home as soon as possible."

They repacked their backpacks, left everything they didn't need behind and finally stood in the doorway ready to leave.

"Good luck," Bob said.

"Thank you. It'll be fine," Jupiter assured him.

"Let's hope so... Now come on, we haven't got all day," Pete urged and went ahead already.

Jupiter paused for a moment and pulled Bob aside to murmur something to him. Then he waved goodbye and hurried to follow Pete.

"Well, what did you have to whisper?" Pete asked as they marched with taut steps through the small forest.

"Nothing at all," claimed Jupiter.

"Come on, I saw exactly how you whispered."

Jupiter waved. "He just got a few little instructions from me. You'll see."

Pete pulled a face, but he was satisfied with this answer.

They reached the slope. Now it got steep. They decided not to follow the path this time, but to go straight ahead across the meadow, always uphill. This way they could not miss the summit.

They did not take a break, only took a sip from their water bottles every now and then, and did not let themselves be stopped when it began to drizzle a little. A good hour after their departure, they reached the cloud line and crossed it. Instantly they were again enveloped in thick fog. The visibility was suddenly only twenty metres. And with the fog, the fear came back.

Suddenly Pete felt himself being watched by a thousand invisible eyes. He thought he saw shadows where there were none. And the further they rose, the more he regretted having

contradicted his inner voice and having climbed the mountain with Jupiter. He hated himself for it. And he hated Jupiter for his stubbornness. But now there was no turning back.

10. Gold

When Sarah offered to cook something, Bob pretended to want to catch up on some sleep and went up the stairs to the top floor. He opened the door to their bedroom and closed it without entering the room.

Then he listened for a moment. He only heard the clinking of pots from below. Bob tiptoed to the door at the end of the corridor, opened it silently and slipped in.

This was Mr Falkner's room. It was larger than the attic room in which The Three Investigators had slept in. It was a real guest room with its own closet, a comfortable armchair and a desk.

Bob looked around. There were no mountains of paper, no books, no notes, as he had expected. On the table was only a flat laptop, nothing more. The writer with the rickety mechanical typewriter was probably a cliché that had served its time. Bob opened the laptop and turned it on. The battery gauge told him that the battery was not even half full. But it would be enough for a quick look at all the documents. He clicked on a folder and skimmed the document names. Most of it didn't sound very interesting—tax returns, fax forms, invoices...

But then Bob came across something interesting—'Ashford'. Bob opened the document. It was not very long, just a few pages, but they were significant. It was a detailed account of the legend of the phantom of Fog Mountain, just as Mr Falkner had told them the night before.

Falkner had apparently not written the report himself, but copied it from a book. He had indeed become thoroughly familiar with the history of this area. Bob closed the document and opened the next one, which sounded promising—'Bestseller'.

"Let's see what Mr Falkner puts down on paper," he murmured as the document was loading. This document was much more extensive. It was a novel, at least the beginning of it. Bob skimmed the first pages.

It was about a lonely house in the mountains, far from any civilization, where an elderly couple and a writer live. One day, the couple's grown-up daughter comes to visit.

"'Cynthia had honey-blond hair and a pretty face'," someone suddenly read aloud.

Bob got a shock and whirled around. Behind him stood Sarah and she looked at the screen with a wrinkled forehead. She pretended not to have registered Bob's shock and read on: "'Mr Walker, who had always had a weakness for young girls, found himself at dinner looking at her sensual lips incessantly.' The creep! I knew he had his eyes on me all along! He's at least 15 years older than me!"

Now she looked Bob in the eye. "Don't be surprised that you didn't hear me. This is my parents' house. Although I didn't grow up here, I know every single plank and know how to enter a room silently. So, you're snooping through Mr Falkner's documents."

"I'm not snooping," Bob defended himself. "I'm looking for a lead."

"A lead? What kind?"

"I don't know. Something that'll get us somewhere. Jupiter thinks Falkner may know more than he's telling us. So he asked me to look at his laptop."

"And you tell me you want to go to sleep," Sarah said.

“And you? Weren’t you going to cook?”

Sarah didn’t answer. She looked at the screen, then pulled the chair up and sat down with Bob. “Come on, let’s get on with it.”

Bob was surprised. He didn’t quite know what to make of his new ally. Was she, in fact, an ally? He decided to stay alert. Together they skimmed over what Mr Falkner had previously written.

“This is a fairly accurate retelling of everything that’s happened on Lakeview these past few days,” Sarah said thoughtfully. “This conversation here is fiction. And it’s not all that accurate, but the direction is right.”

“And what about the phantom legend?” Bob wondered. “This Mr Walker in the novel keeps talking about it. Is that what Falkner did in real life?”

Sarah shook her head. “At least not in my presence. And this interaction between Cynthia and Walker never happened!”

“Strange,” Bob remarked.

“Huh? What’s strange about that? Are you saying Falkner would suit me well?”

“What? No! That’s not what I mean.”

“Then what?”

“If I didn’t know that Lakeview and the people described really existed, if I really read this like the beginning of a novel, then I would say that this phantom that Mr Walker talks about still plays an important role later in the story. You know what I mean? Falkner builds his novel as if he already knows what’s going to happen in reality,” Bob explained.

Sarah shrugged. “Coincidence. What else would he be writing about? Nothing happens up here.”

Bob didn’t believe in coincidence, but put the thought aside and went back to the text. The story took an unexpected turn when three young hikers suddenly appeared. “‘As they appeared tired and distraught at dinner, Walker saw them for the first time—the precocious, the nervous, and the quiet.’ That takes the biscuit! Who does he think he is?”

“I told you so,” Sarah agreed with him. “He builds us all into his story.”

Bob read a few more sentences, but then the text broke off abruptly. “He must have written this last night before the power went out. Before...”

He didn’t go on. How had Jupiter got the idea that Falkner himself could have had something to do with it? After all, he was the victim! No, they wouldn’t be able to solve any puzzles in this room. The secret was on the mountain, nowhere else.

Sarah didn’t see it that way. “Look at the other documents.”

“Do you think it’ll do any good?” Bob wondered.

Instead of answering, Sarah pulled the laptop towards her and went to work herself.

Bob looked over her shoulder at the screen. “Hurry up, the battery’s dying.”

Sarah nodded absently, clicked on the folder and read the document names.

“There!” cried Bob. “A document called ‘Ashford Research’. This could be interesting.”

Sarah opened the document and read aloud: “‘I have decided to record every detail of my research very carefully from now on. If the whole story really does become a novel, I can’t start recording it soon enough. In the last few days, the big breakthrough came for my research! I have learned that I was right in many of my assumptions.

“‘While Ashford was closing the mine, he had a mistress named Melissa Radcliffe. And there are growing signs that this love affair produced an illegitimate son. Melissa Radcliffe died many years ago. I’ll never hear from her again. But she had a sister, Angelica Parker, born Radcliffe, twenty years her junior. She is now an old woman and lives in Houston. I was able to locate her and make contact with her.’”

“Gee, he sure went to a lot of trouble, didn’t he?” Bob remarked. “Radcliffe... I feel like I’ve heard that name before... Keep reading, Sarah, the battery gauge is already flashing. We’re running out of juice.”

Sarah’s index finger tapped the cursor key, which ran the text across the screen. “Mrs Parker was reluctant to confide her family history to me, a complete stranger. But finally she gave in and willingly told me that her sister did indeed have a son, Harvey Radcliffe. She spoke of him as the black sheep of the family. It wasn’t easy to get details out of her, but she finally let slip that he had been in prison several times for various crimes, including aggravated assault. She did not know where he lives today, they have not had any contact with each other for years.

“She knew next to nothing about Richard Ashford. When her sister had a relationship with him, Mrs Parker was just a little girl. However, she found some letters from Richard Ashford in her sister’s estate, made copies of it and sent them to me. Those letters are literally worth their weight in gold! Here are the most interesting excerpts:

My creditors should have left Green Valley by now. I think that soon enough grass will have grown over the matter that I can dare to reopen the mine. In other news, I’m almost finished. All the entrances are bricked up. The tunnel is nearing completion. It won’t be long now, my love.

Soon we’ll be rolling in money and we can finally get married. And nobody will even know what we’re doing. Who would ever think that the only remaining entrance to the mine is right under...’”

The text disappeared.

“No!” Sarah had missed the cursor key and hit the power button on the crowded keyboard of the laptop. Instantly the screen went blank.

“What are you doing?” cried Bob in horror.

“Sorry! That was an accident,” Sarah replied and pressed the same button again. The quiet hum of the fan began—and died again. The monitor remained black. “The battery! It won’t reboot.”

“Damn! Not now! Not now!” Bob himself tried to get the computer working again, but a protesting bleep was the only response. “At the very spot where it became important!”

“Do you really think so?” Sarah innocently asked. “There was no mention of the phantom in the text.”

“Not that. But it might explain why Mr Falkner is here.”

“But we already know that. To write a novel—a very bad one, by the way. What else?”

“I can’t believe this is all of it,” Bob said.

“Why else do you think he’s here for?” Sarah asked.

Bob hesitated. Was Sarah really that clueless? Was the laptop incident really just an accident? But then he said his thoughts out loud: “I think he’s looking for gold.”

11. The Phantom's Lair

"It was a very, very bad idea to come up here," mumbled Pete. He didn't dare speak up. Fog amplified sounds and carried them further than normal air. The Second Investigator feared he could be heard a long way off.

"We can hardly see our hand in front of our eyes," Pete said. "And I have a feeling this mountain is endless. We've been walking through the clouds for at least two hours and it's still going up! It's not normal anymore."

"Take it easy, Pete," Jupiter answered and looked at his watch. "Believe it or not, we've only been in the clouds for half an hour. And it is so steep that we are extremely slow. This vastness—it all seems so because you can't see anything. I assure you, this is an ordinary mountain."

The further up it went, the rockier the surroundings became. Every time a boulder came out of the fog, Pete flinched. In each of these dark grey shadows, he saw a phantom-like figure. His imagination created the most horrible creatures from the pale shapes. Fearful, he eyed the colossus they passed by until he was sure that they were really just rocks.

Then, after an eternity, a shadow appeared which was clearly neither a stone nor a phantom—a square monster snuggled up against a rock face. The two detectives hid behind a rock and looked at the cabin.

"What is this?" whispered Pete.

"I'd say this is a mountain cabin. And possibly the object of our search."

"You... you mean in there... is the phantom?"

"I don't know, Pete, but we'll soon find out."

"You... you're not going in there, are you?"

"Pete," Jupiter said and sighed. "Why are we here?"

"Because we're insane?"

"Wrong."

"Tired of life?"

"Because we're looking for Mr Falkner... and the phantom," Jupiter said. "And the probability of either of them being in this cabin is roughly one hundred and eighteen times greater than lurking behind the nearest rock. So come on!"

"Perhaps... maybe you'd better go ahead on your own," Pete suggested. "If something happens, then..."

"Then what?"

"Then I can still run away."

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever you say."

He stepped out from behind the rock and walked slowly towards the cabin. He hadn't gone five metres when Pete appeared next to him again.

"I've changed my mind," the Second Investigator quickly said. "Instead of staying out here alone, I would rather go and battle the phantom with you."

Jupiter shook his head. "You really are incorrigible, Pete."

Slowly they began to recognize more of the cabin. It was made of wood and seemed to be ancient. The walls were covered with grey-green moss and looked almost like stone. The

windows were tiny, the panes cloudy and dirty. They sneaked up so that they could not be seen from the windows, and finally pressed themselves against the wooden wall between the door and the window.

"We'll have a look through the window first," Jupiter whispered and advanced just far enough for him to risk a quick glance. But inside it was dark and the window was so dirty that he could see absolutely nothing. There could have been a whole phantom army lurking in the cabin and he wouldn't have seen them. But in order not to panic Pete, he claimed: "There's nothing in there."

He went to the door, took a deep breath and pushed the handle down. The wooden door swung open inward, squeaking softly.

The cabin consisted of a single room. It was chaos! The furniture consisted of an ancient bed with a stained, worn mattress on which a military sleeping bag was placed. There was also a wobbly table with a gas cooker and countless tins of food, some of which were opened and swarmed with flies. The floor was dirty. There were pieces of clothing and food leftovers everywhere. The cabin was the most uncomfortable place Jupiter could imagine. But it was deserted, that was the main thing.

"The coast is clear!" Jupiter whispered.

Carefully they entered the cabin and closed the door behind them.

"No phantom," Pete said with relief. "And no Mr Falkner either. Can we go now?"

"Not so fast, Pete! Don't you find this cabin very interesting?"

"No. It's just a run-down mountain cabin. So?"

"Look! We're here on Fog Mountain—on the fabled Fog Mountain, which nobody dares to climb. And yet here stands an old cabin, in which someone has nested for a long time. We should therefore check this place out, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't last a single day here," Pete said and looked disgusted at the dirt around him. "And then there's fog day and night, most of the year, driving you crazy."

Jupiter only listened with half an ear. "The perfect hiding place," he murmured. "Probably nobody in Green Valley even knows of this cabin. No one would suspect that anyone could live at the top of Fog Mountain. Now all we have to do is find out who has taken up residence here and why."

While Jupiter looked around, Pete kept looking over to the window. He expected to see a ghost hand on the window pane again at any moment. Or worse.

"What have we here?" Jupiter asked and walked towards the bed.

A wooden box peeked out from under the frame. "Rule number one: Never hide anything under your bed unless you want an experienced detective to find it immediately."

He crouched down and pulled out the heavy box. The lid was only loosely on top. Jupiter lifted it. There was a lot of straw in it.

"A rabbit hutch?" joked Pete. "Come on, Jupe, let's go, there's nothing here."

"Wait a minute! The straw is just packaging, there's something under here!" Jupiter pushed the straw aside—and gave a surprised whistle. "What have we here?" He pulled out a bundle of long red tubes that looked a bit like tied up candles, only bigger... or like oversized New Year firecrackers.

"What is it, Jupe?"

"You don't need three guesses, Pete. It's dynamite!"

Suddenly, with a loud bang, the door flew open. Jupiter and Pete spun around. In the doorway, the phantom hovered in glowing white. He stared at them from his empty face. The Second Investigator screamed, staggered back and fell backwards onto the bed. Jupiter was terrified and could not move at all.

Then the howling started and the two detectives had blood in their veins frozen!

12. In the Clutches of the Phantom

The blood-curdling scream paralyzed Pete. He closed his eyes and tried to wake up from this nightmare. But it was no dream. Before him stood the phantom of Fog Mountain! Why were they here? Why were they...

"Pete!" The voice of the First Investigator ripped him out of his panic. He opened his eyes.

"Go at him!" Without waiting to see if Pete would react, Jupiter suddenly rushed forward and charged towards the phantom. He attacked the creature! But Pete was still unable to move. Horrified, he watched Jupiter ram his head into the ghost being's stomach. The creature did not stop howling, but now it included a cry of pain mixed in with the lamentation. The phantom writhed.

Jupiter staggered back and took another run-up, but then the figure pulled out a truncheon as if from nowhere and took a swing.

Jupiter saw the weapon flying towards him, but it was too late! He couldn't avoid it! The truncheon hit him on the head that had been lowered to attack and a dull pain rolled over. He could still see the worn floor rushing towards him, then coloured dots exploded before his eyes and it turned black.

Rigid with horror, Pete watched the First Investigator go down. He should have helped him! He should have...

Now the phantom turned to Pete, lowered his faceless head aggressively, raised his truncheon. It rose above Jupiter's motionless body and came towards Pete. Something in the head of the Second Investigator stopped. He stopped thinking. He was also no longer afraid. In his head, there was only one command hammering at breakneck speed, over and over again: 'Get him!' Pete jumped off the bed and ran.

He rushed past the phantom, grazing his body, ran to the door, jumped out and was pulled back hard! One of the straps of his backpack had caught on the door handle! Pete fell backwards to the ground and dangled helplessly at the door. He tried to pull himself loose, to strip the backpack, to escape! But by then the phantom was already right above him! With a terrible cry of triumph, he lifted his truncheon—and struck!

Something drilled into his back. That was the first thing Pete consciously noticed again. Then the headaches. And finally the memory of what had happened slowly returned. The mountain... the fog... the cabin... the phantom! Instantly the adrenalin flooded through his body, making his heart race and waking him up so abruptly that it almost hurt.

It was dark. He couldn't see his hand in front of his eyes. He tried to concentrate on the rest of his senses. The pain in his back probably came from lying on a hard, cold stone. It was only when he tried to stand up when he realized that his hands and feet were tied up.

Pete felt like a sack of flour thrown into a dark hole. At once, the fear returned. With difficulty, he managed to straighten up his body and bring it into a halfway comfortable position. Then he held his breath and listened. There was a rustle... and a sound of breathing.

He was not alone. The question was, who else was here besides him? Friend or foe? Pete cleared his throat. "Hello? Is anybody there?"

His voice echoed eerily. It sounded like he was underground. In a basement. No, not a basement. The floor was too uneven for that. A cave!

"Hello? Pete?" The voice was not far away.

"Yes... Mr Falkner?"

"Yes. I'm here."

"Where is Jupiter?"

"I don't know. Is he here too?"

"I hope so. Jupe!" Pete's call faded in the distance. There was no answer. "Where are we? What happened?"

"The phantom..." Falkner's voice trembled. "It really exists! But it was all just a joke! It dragged me here!" Mr Falkner seemed so frightened that Pete got scared. Compared to the writer, the Second Investigator was downright calm.

"How... how much time has passed?" Pete asked.

"Time?"

"Yes. How long have I been here? I can't remember! It felt like days!" Pete was thinking. "Realistically 12 hours, maybe a little longer."

"What?" Falkner exclaimed, startled. "Only 12 hours ago? What about the others? What about Marc? Where is he?"

"Marc? I don't know who you mean," Pete said.

"Has... has the phantom overpowered you all?"

"No. Jupiter and me," Pete replied. "But tell me, what happened?"

Falkner was silent for a moment, as if trying to remember. Then he said: "I went out of the house. I was sure it was just one of Marc's sick jokes. Now he's overdoing it, I thought. So I went into the fog, far enough away from the house so you couldn't see me. And there, the phantom suddenly appeared in front of me." His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "White and scary. It screamed and howled. And I was suddenly sure that this creature... was not Marc... that it was real. He came straight from hell. I don't know exactly why, but suddenly I blacked out. The phantom must have knocked me out... I woke up here, tied up, in the dark, and... and..." He stopped.

Pete had only understood half of what Falkner had said. Marc? Who was Marc? But he didn't get a chance to ask. Suddenly, a moan came from another corner of the cave or whatever it was.

"Jupe?"

"Hmm? Yes?"

"Jupe! Thank goodness!" Pete cried. "Come on, wake up! We need your help!"

"What? What's going on? What happened?" A second later, it seemed to come to the First Investigator, because suddenly he sounded wide awake: "The phantom! The phantom... Where are we? Pete?"

"Yeah, yeah, all right, Jupe. I'm here." Pete waited until Jupiter was clear in his head, then he told him about what little he knew so far.

"Okay," the First Investigator finally said slowly. "First of all, we must try to free ourselves, everything else can wait. If we get close enough to each other, we might be able to untie each other. Let's give it a try."

It was not easy to move around with their hands and feet tied up, especially on the rough stone floor that tore their skin if they were not careful. But it worked. Centimetre by centimetre, Pete and Jupiter moved towards each other in the darkness—until Pete suddenly couldn't pull his feet back anymore. "Damn! I'm stuck somewhere!"

Jupiter came a bit further, but then something held him back as well. It took a while before he understood what it was. "I'm tied to a rock! That rascal!"

"Me too! I can't move forward!" Mr Falkner also couldn't move far enough to reach any of the others.

"What was that, Juve? Someone was thorough!" Pete cried.

"You can say that again, Pete. All right." Jupiter brought himself groaning into a halfway tolerable position and stared into the darkness where he thought his fellow prisoners were. "Let's postpone the physical effort until later and turn to the intellectual... What do we know? And what can we do with this knowledge? Mr Falkner, I get the impression that you're well ahead of us. Am I correct in my assumption?"

Falkner cleared his throat but did not answer. He seemed to have calmed down a bit, now that he was no longer alone. And now, he played the ignorant again.

But Jupiter didn't let up. "If we want to get out of here again, it can only be an advantage if you tell us everything you know, Mr Falkner! You know the phantom, don't you? Who or what is behind it?"

"I don't know. That is... I thought I knew. But I don't know."

"Who is this Marc you spoke of?" Pete asked.

"A friend. He helped me make this... this plan. That is, it was actually his plan. I only went along with it because I saw a chance to—" He stopped.

"Mr Falkner!" Jupiter now cried angrily and his voice came back as a ghostly echo from the cold cliffs. "I have gone through torture these past few days! I've been chased by phantoms, I've starved, I've been scared to death, I've been knocked down and now I'm lying tied up in a dark hole and don't know if I'll ever come out alive again. If you are responsible for this whole mess, I want to know now!"

"All right. I'll tell you what I know. Although I don't see how that's gonna help us get out of this." Mr Falkner took a deep breath, then began his story: "As you know, I've spent several summer weeks with the Mastersons at Lakeview for years. As time went by, I learned more and more about this area—about the history of Green Valley, about Fog Mountain, Richard Ashford's mine, and so on."

"And one day you came across something that made you sit up and take notice," Jupiter suspected.

"Actually, it wasn't me. It was Marc, a friend of mine. He was interested in the history of this area. I presented my findings to him and when I told him about Richard Ashford and the gold mine, he became suspicious. He was of the opinion that it did not suit Ashford to just give up everything after the mine was empty. He thought the reports about the broken man who went mad in his house in the mountains over time were unbelievable. I had to agree with him and made enquiries. I'll spare you the details. But in the end I found that Ashford had most likely cheated his creditor."

"Cheated?" Pete asked. "How so?"

"Remember? He had agreed to split half his profits from the mine with his creditor. Then he claimed that the gold deposits were exhausted. But that was a lie! There was still gold in the mine. Ashford just didn't want share it with anyone. Presumably he had discovered a new vein, but had kept it secret from his employees.

"So he claimed that the mine was empty to the last crumb of gold. He sent all the workers home, closed the tunnels and played a desperate man by entrenching himself on Lakeview. In reality, he just waited. He was going to let it all hang out, so that when the time came, he could get the gold out of the mine alone to become a rich man."

"But nothing ever came of it," Jupiter remarked.

"I don't know," Mr Falkner confessed. "It's a puzzle I've been unable to solve. Ashford disappeared one day. He left his mistress and his son penniless, and... and disappeared into thin air."

"He turned into the phantom of Fog Mountain," contradicted Pete. "That's what you wanted to say, isn't it?"

"I..." Now Falkner's voice began to tremble again. "I didn't know there really was a phantom! I should never have..."

"There is no phantom," Jupiter said assertively. "What are you trying to make us believe?"

"Excuse me, Jupe?" Pete asked. "There is no phantom? But we have seen it! It knocked us down!"

"Exactly, Pete! It struck us down! With a truncheon! A bit unusual for a ghost, don't you think? I always thought ghosts sucked your blood... or your soul... or they cast a spell... or they give you a fright... or do something else highly mystical. But they don't just take the nearest baseball bat and whack you over the head with it! This barbaric outburst of violence is a highly human idiosyncrasy."

"But it floated!" Pete insisted. "Is that a human thing to do?"

"It didn't float. I'm pretty sure I saw his feet when I went down. When we first encountered the phantom on the mountain, it only looked like it was floating because it was foggy. And this white, flowing figure was probably nothing more than a sheet."

"A sheet?" Pete laughed bitterly. "We didn't fall for a child's birthday joke, did we?"

"Maybe I do, Pete. Come to think of it, it wasn't actually the phantom himself that frightened me. It was all around—the fog, the atmosphere and of course the creepy howling—which the phantom probably played from a recording. If all these factors frighten you and distract you from the actual ghostly figure, you may overlook the fact that you are running away from a man under a white cloth. The question now is: 'Who is this man?' You know, don't you, Mr Falkner? Is it your friend Marc?"

"No. That is... yes. And again, no. I thought it was him. But I was wrong!" His voice had lowered to a soundless whisper. "The whole plan was a huge mistake! And we will all pay for it with our lives!"

"What are you talking about?" Jupiter asked.

"I... I don't even remember whose crazy idea it was," Mr Falkner said. "Marc was of the opinion that there could still be a small fortune in this mountain if I was right with my theory. He had got it into his head to get the gold out of the mine, even if he was unsure until the very end how he wanted to do it. After all, he could hardly scrape it out of the rock with his bare hands. None of this was important to me at all. I just wanted to write my book."

"What book?" Pete asked.

"A novel about Fog Mountain... about Ashford, about the mine, about Lakeview, about the Mastersons and the phantom. Well, one thing led to another. Marc wanted the gold, I wanted the book, so we got together and came up with this insane plan."

"What plan?" Jupiter asked lurking.

"We wanted to find the entrance to the mine again. There were several back then. But Ashford closed them all. And he did his job very, very well, because he didn't want anyone but him to ever set foot in the tunnels again and possibly discover that he had lied. I had already taken long walks through the mountains last summer, but never found the entrance. Then I managed to contact the sister of Ashford's lover. She had sent me old letters that Richard Ashford wrote to her sister. It turned out that Ashford had indeed carefully sealed all the mine entrances."

“At the same time, however, he dug a tunnel, the only remaining access to the tunnels. And this tunnel led directly to his house. Lakeview is not just a house at the foot of Fog Mountain. It is the entrance to the gold mine!”

13. The Heart of the Mountain

“‘Who would ever think that the only remaining entrance to the mine is right under...’ Under what?” cried Bob and cursed as he continued his march through the living room. He could barely feel the pain in his foot anymore. That sentence kept going through his mind.

With Sarah’s help, he had tried to revive the notebook. They had found some batteries in the kitchen cupboards and connected them to the laptop with hair clips and floral wire, but it hadn’t worked. Now the battery was near the fireplace.

Sarah had claimed that batteries revived a little when kept warm. Bob didn’t know if that was true, but it was worth a try. But how long should they wait? If they put the battery back in too soon, they might lose their last chance.

“In principle, the entrance to a gold mine can be anywhere,” Bob kept thinking aloud. “Anyway, on a mountain. Ashford, however, spoke of the fact that no one would suspect the entrance where it actually is. So it can’t be just anywhere. We have to look for a place where people don’t usually look. Yeah, that makes sense. That makes sense. Jupiter would think so.”

“But what kind of place is this?” asked Sarah, who had silently watched the detective from her armchair.

“That is the question. There aren’t too many prominent points in this area.” Bob stopped. “The woods maybe? Would you suspect a mine in the forest?”

“No. But you’d find them the moment you walked through it,” Sarah said. “The forest is not that big. I know it. There’s no mine.”

Bob nodded thoughtfully. “Fine. So not the forest. What else could it be?”

“The lake,” Sarah suggested. “But I hardly think Richard Ashford built an underwater entrance. It would have been very elaborate and very dangerous.”

“Well. Except for the lake, the forest and the mountain itself, there’s not much here. No buildings except Lakeview...” Bob faltered.

“What’s wrong?”

Bob looked into the void. Then his head moved around and he stared at Sarah. “Lakeview! This was Ashford’s house! Do you think it’s possible that he—”

“—Moved the entrance to the mine here?” Sarah cried. “Bob! It’s a brilliant idea!”

“The basement!” Bob shouted.

They looked at each other, then Bob took a candle from the candle holder, lit it and walked over to the stairs leading down. As he went down the first step, he turned to Sarah and said: “Do you even think there’s a chance we could find anything down here?”

“Quite. I don’t think my parents ever took much care of the basement. I wouldn’t put it past them to sit on top of a gold treasure for years and never know it.” She smiled. “If I had lived here when I was a kid, things would have been different. I would have discovered the entrance right away. But now I’m a little too old to go treasure hunting in basements.”

“You used to hang around basements when you were a kid?” Bob asked.

“Yeah! I thought basements were exciting.”

“Then you’re just the person for this search,” Bob remarked.

They went down the stairs. The door to the basement was locked, but Sarah had a key. There was only one large room behind the door. It was so low that they couldn't stand upright. On the walls were shelves with canned food. In one corner, there was a workbench and a collection of various tools hung on the wall above it. There was sawdust on the floor. It smelled musty. With the low ceiling, Bob held the candle flame as high as he could and looked around. The walls were stone like the rest of the house. But the floor was made of wooden planks.

"Are you thinking the same thing I am?" Sarah asked, pointing to the floorboards under her feet.

Bob nodded. Together they began to stamp on the floor. Everywhere it sounded massive—until Bob came to a spot on one side of the workbench. Here his stamping echoed loud and hollow.

"Bull's eye," he shouted, and immediately dropped to his knees to inspect the boards closely. "Here is a hollow space. About one square metre in size. But the floorboards are nailed up... We'd have to..." When he saw the pliers in Sarah's hand, he fell silent. "I see we understand each other."

It did not take long and they had loosened all the nails from the wood. The wooden planks now lay loose on the floor. Bob lifted one. He was right—there was a hidden chamber under the floor. Quickly they removed the remaining planks as well and finally looked into a yawning black shaft.

Bob held his candle inside. "The shaft isn't deep," he said, and his voice trickled down into the dark hole. "There's a passage down there! I can't see how far it goes. In any case, it leads on down there." He stood up and looked at Sarah enthusiastically. "We've really found the way in."

"My parents actually sat on it for years," Sarah moaned, rolling her eyes. "That's typical!"

"What do you think? Shall we?" Bob asked.

"What a question! Of course!"

"Jupiter will be surprised when he comes back," Bob rejoiced. "While he is up there solving the secret of Fog Mountain, we discover a forgotten mine! And who knows, maybe we'll really find gold."

They ran back upstairs to get two flashlights, a rope and candles. Finally, Bob took a piece of chalk. He didn't count on needing it. It probably wasn't such a long walk after all. But when in doubt, he would rather be too well-equipped than otherwise.

Sarah reached for her father's rifle. Bob paused and watched as she weighed it in her hands and finally shouldered it. His doubts returned immediately. Was the laptop incident really just an accident?

Bob swallowed. "You're not thinking of taking that thing with you?"

"Better safe than sorry," Sarah replied.

"Forget it," Bob said. "The rifle stays here."

"Oh. What if we have to defend ourselves? Against the phantom, for example?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah, then what? You gonna shoot it?"

"No, but a gun like that makes an impression."

Bob shook his head decidedly. "The rifle stays here."

Sarah squinted. "You don't trust me, do you?"

"A gun can always be aimed at you too, and faster than you think," Bob replied and decided not to elaborate on this sentence. Sarah should think what she wanted. Anyway, he

was more comfortable if the thing stayed where it was. “Can we go now?”

For a moment, it looked as if Sarah would not give in, but finally she took the rifle from her shoulder and put it back in the corner. “I don’t mind.”

They returned to the basement, put a ladder in the shaft and climbed down, Bob first. It went down about three metres. Then they stood on a tiny patch of stomped earth, from which a tunnel led into the darkness. Bob shone a light into the yawning black hole. The tunnel had been driven through damp earth and supported by thick wooden beams. It led further than the light of the flashlight reached. A shiver ran down Bob’s spine. “I wonder how far it goes in there?”

“I don’t know,” Sarah replied. “But one thing is certain—that tunnel leads straight to Fog Mountain.”

“Let’s see how far we can get,” Bob said and started moving.

The tunnel was very narrow. His shoulders almost touched the walls and he had to bow his head to avoid hitting the ceiling. Sometimes he did touch them, and then loose earth crumbs would trickle to the floor.

The tightness was oppressive. Secretly, he hoped that the tunnel would soon end so they could turn back. But it did not end. Further and further it led north towards the mountain, without ever making a bend. At most, a slight ascent could be felt. When Bob looked at his watch after a while, he noticed that they had been walking for five minutes.

“There’s no end to it,” Sarah whispered behind him. Her voice was absorbed by the crumbly walls of brown earth and half rotten wood like water from a sponge.

But when the end came, it was so abrupt that Bob’s breath was taken away. He had been shining on the ground for a while rather than ahead. When he lifted the flashlight, the end of the tunnel was right in front of him. Bob stepped through it and suddenly found himself in the middle of another passage. It was much, much wider and higher and the walls were no longer made of earth but of solid rock. It was a junction—behind them was the tunnel through the earth, in front of them and to the right and left was a tunnel through the rock.

“Wow!” Bob marvelled, and this time a distorted, hollow echo came back.

Behind him Sarah stepped out of the passage. She also stopped reverently for a while and let the light of her flashlight glide over the rock walls.

“We should be in the middle of Fog Mountain,” she whispered.

Bob nodded. “The tunnel led us right into the old mine. Awesome! I hadn’t imagined it that big. Shall we move on?”

“Of course. I suggest that we go straight ahead. Then we can’t get lost.”

“Agreed,” said Bob, but he took the precaution of taking the piece of chalk out of his pocket and drew a question mark on the rough wall.

Then they went further, deeper and deeper into the old gold mine, right into the heart of Fog Mountain.

14. Wake-Up Call

“What?” cried Pete. “The entrance to the mine is under the house? But then the Mastersons would have found the gold by now.”

“They know nothing of this,” Mr Falkner said. “They’ve never been particularly interested in the history of their house. And I never told them, of course. The entrance is probably well hidden, which is why they never found it.

“Ashford didn’t want to risk exposing his deception. He always had to be cautious that his creditor could turn up at his place one day to see whether he had hoarded a few riches. An obvious tunnel entrance would have been suspicious. Unfortunately I never had the chance to look in the basement because the door was always locked and I never had the chance to pick the lock unnoticed.”

“Slowly it’s dawning on me,” said Jupiter. “Let me guess—you and Marc were planning to explore the mine, but of course without being disturbed. But to enter the mine undisturbed, you would have to get the Mastersons out of the house. The only problem was that they never left the house for long periods of time. So you thought of a way to drive them out of Lakeview effectively. And that’s when you came up with the idea of resurrecting the phantom of Fog Mountain.”

Mr Falkner said nothing, but that was answer enough for the First Investigator. “You knew Mrs Masterson already believed the legends and was easily impressed. But for Mr Masterson, you’d have to put on a show. You’ve done that. Last night’s performance was indeed breathtaking.”

“Wait a minute!” Pete interfered. “You’re saying this was all a fake, just to get us out of the house?”

“That was the plan, yes,” Mr Falkner said in a low voice.

“What madness!” cried the Second Investigator. “All this horror show just for this one purpose? Wouldn’t it have been easier if you have... perhaps you could have sent a fake letter to the Mastersons, subpoenaed them in court for example. You could have used it to lure them out of the house.”

“But that wasn’t the only purpose of the plan,” Jupiter continued. “Right, Mr Falkner? How did you put it? Marc wanted the gold, you wanted the book. You wanted the story, didn’t you? You were working on a novel about Fog Mountain and its legends—and this includes the phantom.

“Truthfulness! That’s what your work is all about. To keep your story as close to reality as possible, you staged your phantom show to see how the Mastersons would react. You didn’t want to invent their reactions, you wanted to reflect reality. Your imagination was not enough. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Falkner said soundlessly. Then he added defensively: “But it was just a joke! A crazy idea that Marc and I had one evening when we were thinking about how I could advance my novel and how to get to the entrance of the mine. The little phantom production was crazy and ingenious at the same time. You’re right, Jupiter—it was really a unique opportunity for me to observe people’s reactions to truly nightmarish situations. Which writer

has the opportunity to do this? And when you showed up unexpectedly, it was like a gift from heaven!”

“More guinea pigs,” Pete said bitterly.

“Right.”

“Mr Falkner, you’re a sick man,” Pete remarked.

“Perhaps,” the writer replied. “But now my own imagination has caught up with me. It has indeed become reality! The phantom last night... that wasn’t Marc! He would never have knocked me down and sent me to the mountain! And neither would he do that to you. We never intended to harm anyone physically. From the beginning, we agreed that no one was to be hurt. Now do you understand?”

“When I left the house last night, it was part of the production. I would have hid in the fog and returned after a while with some hair-raising stories. Instead, the phantom knocked me down—the real phantom! This creature is real! Ashford’s ghost—we woke him up! First Marc fell into his trap and now we did. And the phantom will not rest until we are all dead!”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” cried Jupiter. “The phantom is a fantasy, nothing more! And it is your own imagination. You created this creature according to the legends that are told in Green Valley... with white, flowing cloth that looks ghostly in the fog, and a tape recorder. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Falkner replied impatiently. “Yes, you’re right, but you’re not listening to me! It wasn’t Marc who attacked me last night!”

“How can you be so sure?” Jupiter asked.

“Pardon? We made this plan together!” Mr Falkner said.

“You said yourself that your main concern was the show, which you then wanted to deal with in your book,” Jupiter recalled. “But Marc was about something else—about gold! And if you had actually made a find in the mine together, you would have shared the find, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Say, Mr Falkner,” Jupiter began, lowering his voice. “Did it ever occur to you that your partner Marc might be so bent on getting the gold that he might betray you?”

Mr Falkner gasped in fright and remained silent. But his silence was good enough as an answer.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Jupiter listened. “What’s wrong now?”

Pete also listened into the darkness. “That... this is...”

“Your stupid alarm clock!” Jupiter cried. “How did it get here? Where is it?”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“I have no idea,” Pete said. “It’s coming from somewhere over there.”

Jupiter frowned. “Did you have it in your backpack when we climbed Fog Mountain?”

“Uh... yes.”

“What was it for?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.” Pete smiled, even though he knew Jupiter couldn’t see him. “I guess I thought you could always use an alarm clock like this.”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“This means that our backpacks are also here in the cave... or at least yours. And not too far away. Pete! Do you have a pocket knife in your backpack?”

“Yes!”

Immediately, the two detectives started crawling in the direction of the beeps.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Damn!” Jupiter pressed out. “I can’t get any further!”

Pete managed to get a little closer, but finally he too was stopped by the rope with which he was tied to the rock. “Damn!”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Judging by the sound, the backpack was at most two metres away. But that was two metres too much. No matter how much they stretched and stretched, they couldn’t reach the thing. Finally they were exhausted and gave up.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Aaaargh!” Jupiter growled angrily. “That thing is driving me crazy! Why is it ringing anyway?”

“It must have switched itself on again when I got stuck with my backpack on the cabin door,” Pete surmised. “And I had set it for a different time beforehand so that we wouldn’t be awakened again accidentally in the middle of the night.”

“Genius, Pete,” Jupiter said. “In return we can now listen to the beeping without being able to do anything about it. When does it switch itself off automatically?”

“Uh... in one hour.”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Mr Falkner?” Jupiter asked. “Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Say something to distract me from this stupid alarm clock!”

“I don’t know what to say anymore. Marc—a traitor? I can’t believe it.”

“But it is a logical explanation. A hundred times more logical, at any rate, than the possibility that we’re dealing with a real phantom,” Jupiter surmised.

“But if you’re right, Jupiter—what’s he up to now? What happens to us?”

“I was hoping you could tell us. I don’t know this Marc. But you do,” Jupiter said. “What kind of person is he? What do you think he’s capable of?”

“He has a certain criminal potential,” Falkner admitted. “But he would never go so far as to physically harm a human being, as far as I know him.”

“Well, then you may have to reconsider the characterization of your main characters,” Jupiter replied snappily.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Geez! This alarm clock makes me sick! We have to get out of here! If only to finally dismantle the damn thing into its component parts!”

15. Saved by the Beep

Bob drew a question mark on the wall. He had stopped counting how many he had drawn. Every few metres, there was a junction. Sometimes the tunnels bored only a few metres into the rock and ended there, but there were also tunnels that led further than the light of the flashlight. Despite the markings, they were afraid to get lost and decided to follow the path straight ahead each time. The mine was bigger than he would have thought possible.

After a while, the tunnel led steeply uphill, there were stairs that went further and further up, in some places even old, fragile-looking wooden ladders, over which they could get one level higher. One thing was clear—they were working their way towards the top of the mountain.

Here and there, tunnels had collapsed. Sometimes huge boulders blocked half the way. Bob wondered if the mine looked like this when it was closed or if the deterioration had started later. Either way, it was scary and eerie. No one had entered these tunnels for more than half a century. They were the first to stir up the dust of decades. Bob only hoped not to break anything, not to wake any demons and not to put a curse on himself.

But no matter how big the mine was and no matter how much Bob had paid attention to it, he had not seen any gold. No treacherous glitter in the grey rock faces, no glittering chunks on the ground. Nothing.

Bob and Sarah had walked through the tunnels in silence the whole time. Both had indulged their own fantasies about this mine. It was a silent agreement—no one said anything, because a loud word might have destroyed the strange magic that lay over this place.

But then Sarah suddenly stopped behind him. She put her head slightly tilted as if she was listening.

“What is it?” whispered Bob.

“Shh! You hear that?”

Bob listened. “What?”

“There’s something. Something like a beeping sound.”

Now Bob heard it too. Far, far away, and as if through a thick wall, a sound penetrated so softly that he sensed it more than he really heard it. When he stepped a few metres into a side tunnel, it got a little louder.

Bob could not believe his ears. That wasn’t just any beeping. It was the beeping. “I know that sound.”

“What are you saying?”

“Yes! That’s Pete’s stupid travel alarm clock!”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Yes, I do. One hundred percent. That’s it. But why...”

Bob shone his light deeper into the tunnel. And after a few metres, there’s a flight of stairs that go straight up. The beeping sound was definitely coming from the stairwell.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Pete’s up there somewhere... or at least his alarm clock is,” Bob said. “We have to get up there.”

“We are probably close to the summit now,” mumbled Sarah. “Exactly where Pete and Jupiter wanted to go. If Pete’s alarm clock rings for some reason and he doesn’t switch it off, then...”

“Are those two in danger?” Bob finished the sentence. He hastily drew a question mark at the bottom of the stairs. “Come on! We have to go up!”

He stepped on the rough, bumpy steps and hurried up. The stairs led up in crazy twists and turns. It was insanely steep, so that Bob was out of breath after only a few steps. But they were on the right track—the beeping got louder and louder.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Finally, the stairs ended in a small, round cave whose walls were unfinished as if they were of natural origin and not part of the mine. This is where the beeping was loudest. Bob looked around. There was nothing here. No Pete, no alarm clock. And there was no exit leading out of the cave. Still, it sounded like the alarm clock was right next to them.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

And then he heard voices. It was Jupiter and Pete! They were talking!

“They’re right behind this wall,” Sarah shouted excitedly, “Pete! Jupiter! Can you hear us?”

Stunned silence on the other side. Then Jupiter’s voice came: “Sarah?”

“Yes!”

“Thank goodness!” Jupiter cried. “Where are you?”

“I... don’t know!”

“Is Bob with you?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes,” Bob said. “We’re in a little cave and we can hear you through the wall.”

“We’re in a cave too,” cried Pete. “Hey! Do you have a flashlight?”

“Yes,” Bob replied.

“I see a little glimmer of light on the wall there!” Pete cried. “There must be a crack or something between our caves!”

“Where?” Bob said. “Shine your light through!”

“We can’t! We’re tied up!” Jupiter cried. “Come on, you gotta find a way through the wall somehow and get us out!”

In a hurry, Sarah and Bob searched the cave wall. Finally, they found the crack. Bob threw a small pebble through it and heard it roll across the floor on the other side.

“We’ve got the spot!” cried Sarah. “The wall is only very thin. Nevertheless, it is a rock face. I don’t know how to...”

“Excuse me, Sarah, could you step aside?” Bob had picked up a boulder, the biggest one he could find. Sarah stepped back in horror, and Bob threw it against the wall with all his might. A palm-sized piece broke out, enough to see through. Bob knelt down and shone through the hole. Then he saw them—Jupiter, Pete and Mr Falkner, bound and tied to rocks, sitting on the ground.

“Here we are!” cried Pete excitedly.

“Yes, yes, I see you. Hold on, we’re trying to make the hole bigger,” Bob said.

Bob picked up the boulder again and hammered it on the wall. Sarah also picked up a rock and helped him. Little by little, more and more crumbled out of the wall until finally the hole was big enough to crawl through. Bob lay flat on his stomach and crawled to the other side.

“Bob!” cried Pete in relief. “At last! Quick, untie us! My hands are almost numb!”

“No,” Jupiter intervened. “First turn off the alarm clock! That is our top priority!”

Bob grinned, pulled out his pocket knife and first freed the Second Investigator from his shackles. Then Pete went deeper into the cave, found the backpack that had been carelessly thrown into a corner and got the alarm clock out, quickly turned it off and fiddled further with it.

“What a relief!” moaned Jupiter. In no time at all everyone was free. Bob put a candle on a rock, lit it and switched off his flashlight to conserve the batteries.

“How did you get here?” Jupiter asked. “How did you find us?”

“We have discovered the entrance to the gold mine,” Bob reported excitedly. “We ventured through many tunnels until Sarah suddenly heard the alarm clock. Then we just followed the beeping.”

“You are the—” Jupiter began.

“Ha!” cried Pete. “You see! I told you, Juve. You never know what you might need an alarm clock for!”

The Three Investigators, Mr Falkner and Sarah quickly brought each other up to speed.

Then Bob asked, “Where are we? This cave doesn’t belong to the mine anymore, does it?”

“No,” said Jupiter. “It leads somewhere further out.”

Pete frowned. “Outside? How do you know that, Juve?”

The First Investigator casually pointed at the candle. “The flame flickers. That means there’s a circulation of air. And there can only be air circulation if this cave has an exit straight out.”

“Wise guy,” growled Pete.

“Let’s get out of here!” urged Mr Falkner.

They collected their backpacks and set out on their journey. The cave became narrower and broke off sharply. In front, it shimmered grey daylight.

“At last! There’s the opening!” Jupiter went ahead.

After a short stretch straight ahead, a passage about two metres wide led outside. The First Investigator squinted his eyes in front of the unusually bright light and looked out.

They were in the middle of the clouds. In front of the cave opening was a huge boulder. And further out was the wet meadows of the mountain. Jupiter looked around the boulder and staggered back. Immediately the others were alarmed.

“What is it, Juve?” whispered Pete.

“Less than ten metres from here stands the mountain cabin where the phantom overpowered us.”

“He’s practical,” Pete thought, and turned to Mr Falkner immediately and said: “Your clean friend Marc didn’t have to lug us around very long.”

“What do we do now, Jupiter?” Sarah asked. “Do you think he is still in the cabin? Won’t he see us when we come out of the cave?”

“We only have to make it fifty metres, but we are covered by the fog,” Bob said. “On the other hand, we can also go back through the mine and tunnels... but we’ll have to enlarge the hole in the wall a bit to make Juve fit through, and—”

“Very funny, Bob,” Jupiter hissed.

They were still discussing their options when Mr Falkner suddenly raised his hand. “Be quiet! Do you hear that?”

Nobody said anything. And then they all heard it—a muffled murmur close to them. It sounded like someone trying to make himself heard with a gag in his mouth.

“There’s someone else in the cave!” murmured Falkner.

They looked around. It's true! There was a narrow gap in the wall, which they had carelessly passed, just wide enough for one person. And out of that crack came the muffled sound. They came closer.

"This could be a trap," Pete whispered.

"Yes, maybe," Jupiter agreed. "Or maybe not." He gave himself a jolt and stepped through the crack. There was a cavity behind it. On the ground was a bound, violently writhing figure with a gag in his mouth. Jupiter shone a light at him. It was a man he had never seen before.

Mr Falkner entered the cave behind him. "Marc!" He immediately crouched down beside the prisoner and freed him from his gag and shackles.

Marc gasped and stared alternately at Mr Falkner and Jupiter with a look flickering with fear. He was pale, his hair wildly tousled, chin and cheeks unshaven. He looked exhausted to death. Confused, desperate and in no way dangerous. "Harry! Thank goodness."

Mr Falkner helped his friend up. "First, come out of this hole."

On shaky legs, Marc stumbled through the gap back into the big cave. Then he gave Sarah, Pete and Bob unsteady looks. "Harry... what happened? Are you here to... I know you guys! You were on the mountain. Before... how many days ago? I'm so confused! Harry, we have to get out of here as fast as we can. I'm sure that lunatic is still out there somewhere."

Mr Falkner tried to calm his friend and explain to him in a few sentences that they too had been captured and had just been freed. And that everything was all right now and there was no danger. But was this the truth? While Falkner was talking to Marc, Jupiter had only one thing on his mind—he had been mistaken. Marc was not the phantom. He was a victim. But that meant that Mr Falkner was right. That there really was a phantom that haunted Fog Mountain. And that meant that they were still not safe.

Jupiter had a bad feeling in his gut. "We should leave here as soon as possible," he interrupted Mr Falkner. "We can sort out everything else later. The best way is through the mine and tunnels. I'd rather not go past the cabin. It could be that—"

"Jupe!" Pete's shout made everyone turn around. The Second Investigator tremblingly pointed to the opening of the cave.

Out there in the fog, the phantom was hovering!

16. The Ambush

Involuntarily, everyone took a step back. The phantom had seen them! And it floated slowly towards them! Then he began his horrible, plaintive howl. Sarah was the first to run. And without even needing to think, Pete followed. They rushed back into the cave. The others were hot on their heels.

“Quickly! Through the wall to the other side!” cried Bob.

He didn’t have to tell Sarah twice. She had already thrown herself to the floor and crawled through the narrow opening. Too slow! They’d never all make it before the phantom caught them! But the ghostly figure—remained behind. It did not follow them into the cave.

Pete had already climbed through the opening, then Marc and Mr Falkner followed. Jupiter and Bob looked at each other.

“It thinks we’re trapped,” Jupiter said. “It doesn’t know that you can get into the mine from here. With a bit of luck, it won’t follow us.”

“And with a bit of bad luck, it’s listening to us right now and it’ll be here any minute!” Bob crawled through the opening. “Hurry up, Juve! We don’t have—”

“It’s coming!” cried the First Investigator in fear. A moment later, his head appeared on the other side of the opening. Jupiter crawled through it as fast as he could—and got stuck!

“Damn!” he pressed out. “I’m stuck somewhere! I’m, uh... aaahh!”

Horried, Bob, Pete and the others watched in horror as Jupiter’s body that had already been half on their side was torn back with a jerk. Desperately, the First Investigator clung to a ledge. “It grabbed me! Help me!”

In a flash, Bob and Pete grabbed Jupiter, each one taking a hand. They pulled. The other side pulled.

Jupiter screamed. “Aaaaaah! Don’t let go, never let go!”

Sarah came to their aid. She took Jupiter by the shoulders.

“With a jerk!” cried Pete. “One, two, three!” They tugged with all the strength they could muster. The First Investigator flew out of the opening and landed with his face on the rough stone. In panic, he crawled away from the opening. A white ghost claw reached in to grab him, but missed.

“Get out of here!” Jupiter gasped and got himself up. “He can’t follow us so fast! He’s bigger than me and I’ve barely got through the hole!”

Bob flashed his flashlight and ran to the stairs. Together they hurried as fast as they could down into the depths.

At the end of the stairs, Bob oriented himself to the question marks and returned to the main tunnel, then they ran downhill towards the lake. Jupiter, Pete, Mr Falkner and Marc had no time to marvel at the abandoned gold mine. They just wanted to get out of there! ... Until Jupiter wondered where they actually fled to. And from what. And why. He slowed down and finally stopped. He listened back but nobody seemed to follow them... Not yet.

“Juve!” cried Pete. “What’s the matter? Are you hurt?”

“No, just stand still,” Jupiter said. Hesitantly, the others also slowed down.

“What’s wrong? We must hurry!” Pete said.

“We don’t have to,” Jupiter said and waited until the others had gathered around him.

“Jupe! The phantom... will follow us! The stone wall is no obstacle!” Pete said. “If Bob and Sarah could punch a hole in it, so could the phantom!”

“So what? Let it come quietly! What are we actually afraid of? There are six of us, running from someone with a sheet over his head! Are we out of our minds?”

“But it’s a ghost!” Pete cried.

“Nonsense, Pete. The fact that Marc is not behind this doesn’t automatically mean that the phantom is real. I saw his shoes, remember? He’s still just an ordinary person. A violent one, but a human being. And our superiority in numbers should protect us from any assault.”

“Then why did you run away yourself, Jupe?” Pete asked.

“Because... well, because you all ran!” claimed the First Investigator. “Should I have been left alone? All right, all right, I admit I was scared. But it was only because I let my emotions take over without thinking. A phantom! Don’t make me laugh. We could have caught the guy up there and exposed him. Instead, we fell for his silly howling and ran away. But this is the last time it will happen to me. I’m not running away anymore.” Determined, he looked from one to the other.

He didn’t really seem to have convinced anyone. But Jupiter did not let himself be put off. “We will ambush this phantom man down here in the mine. If he is clever, he will spot the question mark trail and follow it. Sooner or later, he will pass by here.”

“Shh!” Pete interrupted him. “There’s something there.”

They listened. A distant hammering echoed through the tunnels. Stone struck stone and broke. The echo of the bursting rock sounded like the rattling breath of a monster that lived in the depths of the mountain.

“He’s enlarging the opening!” whispered Bob. “You were right, Jupe, he is following us!”

“There! Now the hammering has stopped,” Pete replied. “He’ll be here in five minutes.”

“All the better,” said Jupiter. “Then we’ll get him! Come on, guys, it’s no problem together. All we need now is a good hiding place.”

Disbelief, scepticism and fear—that was what Jupiter read in the faces of the others. But also a spark of hope that Jupiter was right and that together they could put an end to this haunting once and for all.

Finally, no one objected and together they searched for a suitable place for an ambush. It was located at a place where a narrow tunnel crossed the main tunnel. It was hard to see. If they pressed themselves tightly against the wall, the guy wouldn’t notice them until it was too late and they could jump on him.

The small group split up—Bob, Sarah and Mr Falkner hid in the left tunnel, the others in the right. Pete took off his backpack, which he had been able to save on the run, and chucked it to one side.

“We should turn off the lights now and be quiet, so that the phantom isn’t warned!” whispered Jupiter.

“Should we get hold of some weapons first?” Pete asked.

“We don’t need a weapon,” claimed Jupiter. “Six against one, the winner should already be decided.”

“I hope you’re right,” Pete said gloomily and continued.

But Jupiter pulled him back by the shoulder. “We have no time for arguments! We must take a stand!”

“Shh!” hissed Bob from the other side. “Lights out! I think I heard something!”

Instantly all their lights went out and they all listened. There were steps! They echoed from the tunnel walls and slowly came closer. No one dared to breathe. Had they been too

loud? Had the stranger noticed them?

The reflection of a flashlight flickered across the walls and the floor. It came closer and closer... The Three Investigators pressed themselves even closer to the rock face and watched the dancing light in tension.

Then the white figure of the phantom moved into their field of vision. It's now or never!

As if on command, The Three Investigators, Sarah, Mr Falkner and Marc jumped at the figure from both sides. It all happened in a flash. The phantom realized in a split-second what was happening, retreated and switched off his flashlight. It was pitch dark! And instead of getting hold of the stranger, Jupiter and Bob, who were the first to jump out of the passage, bounced against each other, stumbled and fell. Instantly, chaos reigned in the darkness! Everyone was screaming and shouting and groping around.

Then finally a light came on.

The phantom pointed his flashlight at the attackers and blinded them. In his right hand, which was suddenly no longer a ghostly claw but a normal, human hand, he held a gun!

"Don't move!" Everyone froze.

"Go! Get over there! Get against the wall! No, lad, over there, so I can keep an eye on you all!" His voice was deep and rough and would not tolerate any contradiction.

While they were standing in line obediently and without saying a word, Jupiter slapped himself in thought over and over again! Six against one! And yet they had lost! And why? ... Because they had forgotten to blind their opponent with their flashlights! ... Because they had underestimated him! Now they were trapped.

Jupiter thought of the blow with the truncheon that had carried Pete and him into the realm of dreams, then at the thought of what this madman would do with a weapon. He got scared.

"The game is over!" growled the man beneath the phantom disguise. Now they saw quite clearly that it was actually little more than a white cloth with holes for the eyes.

"Who are you?" asked Jupiter and tried hard to give his voice a solid sound.

"I am the owner of this mine. It's mine! The whole mountain's mine! You have no business here! Nobody has a right to the gold but me!"

He wiped the masquerade off his head. A huge, strong man of about sixty years of age appeared, with coal-black, piercing eyes, dishevelled hair and a shaggy beard. The Three Investigators had never seen him before.

He pointed his gun at Marc, then at Mr Falkner. "You!" he shouted. "And you! You will not deny me my inheritance! It is mine! The mine is my father's property!"

Suddenly it occurred to Jupiter. "You are Richard Ashford's son!"

"Right. Harvey Radcliffe."

17. Revelations

“Harvey Radcliffe!” cried Pete in horror. “The convict who’s been on the run from the police for months!” The man glared at him, and Pete instantly regretted his words.

“You were looking for the entrance to the gold mine, weren’t you?” Jupiter asked.

“Just like these two guys here. They think they can cheat me out of my inheritance. That gold is mine, all mine! For weeks I’ve been looking for that mine, and then suddenly these guys come and try to take it all away from me! On my mountain. But thanks for showing me the way in. You’ve done your part. *Adios.*”

Harvey Radcliffe raised his gun and released the safety catch. He pointed it at Marc. Then he swung over to Mr Falkner. And back to Marc. “Who’s first?”

“Sir!” cried Jupiter imploring. “Do not do it! No one wants to take anything from you! You are making a mistake!”

“Shut up, fat boy! You’ll get your turn!”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Ashford’s son flinched when he heard the beeping behind his back and turned around. He was distracted for a second. That was enough.

Pete jumped forward, spun around and kicked the gun out of the man’s hand. It flew away in an arc and landed in the darkness.

His opponent hardly had time to react. Protecting himself, he held his arms in front of his face, but by then The Three Investigators, Sarah, Mr Falkner and Marc had already pounced on him. He had no chance. Within seconds, he was overwhelmed and was held on the ground until Bob tied him with the rope he had brought with him. He raved, but then Bob unceremoniously stuffed a handkerchief in his mouth.

“Phew!” groaned the Second Investigator. “That was close!”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

Jupiter burst into relieved laughter. “Why?” he shouted. “What’s that cursed alarm ringing again?”

“Cursed? My beloved alarm clock saved our lives!”

“Yes!” cried Jupiter laughing. “But why?”

“I don’t know,” Pete confessed with a wry smile. “After Bob released us in the cave, I turned off the beeps, and changed the alarm time. When I put my backpack down just now, I guess it—”

“I guess it got turned on!” moaned Jupiter.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

The First Investigator shook his head in bewilderment.

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Pete?”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Yeah?”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Would you do me a favour?”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“What?”

Di-di-di-di-di-di-dit.

“Turn it off!”

Bob’s travel diary:

It’s late at night. Outside the fog is already building up, but luckily we have electricity again. And in the light, everything is only half as scary. Mr and Mrs Masterson have finally gone to bed. I thought they’d never stop asking. Jupe, Pete and Sarah are still sitting with me, drinking calming tea (Pete insisted on it, but honestly I don’t mind) and chatting. And I think it’s time to write down the rest of the story as well. So where was I?

Okay. We dragged Harvey Radcliffe with united forces to the basement of Lakeview. A few hours later, the Mastersons returned with the police. They arrested Radcliffe as soon as they realized that he was indeed the escaped convict Pete had heard about on the radio. It was only at that moment that I realized that that was why Radcliffe’s name had sounded so familiar to me in Mr Falkner’s computer documents.

The police officers told us that Radcliffe had been in prison for robbery and several cases of aggravated assault and had escaped a few months ago. That was why he was so dangerous. But luckily, he is now on his way back to his prison cell. I am glad that I will have nothing more to do with that guy.

Together with the police and Radcliffe himself, we also solved the rest of the mystery. Radcliffe had learned who his father, whom he had never known, had been by reading his late mother’s diary. And that he had had a gold mine here on Fog Mountain many years ago. The diary probably also mentioned that there was still gold in the mine—and Radcliffe wanted that, of course.

He fled the police and made his way up here and barricaded himself in an old, forgotten cabin up on the mountain. From there, he searched for the entrance to the mine. There was nothing in his mother’s diary about where it is. So Radcliffe assumed that the entrance was somewhere on top of the mountain. He found a cave near the cabin and searched it—but without success. We now know that he was close to it, but he never discovered the second cave behind the thin rock wall.

Then he tried blasting. Jupe and Pete discovered dynamite in the cabin. He randomly blew up some rocks because he thought they hid the mine entrance. As I said, he wasn’t the brightest... but bright enough, however, to make the blasts at night. He was afraid that others could hear the explosions all the way down to Green Valley, so he preferred a time when everyone was asleep. Almost all of them.

As luck would have it, the three clever detectives from Rocky Beach were awake at exactly this time three nights ago thanks to Pete’s stupid alarm clock. The earthquake we felt was not an earthquake, but an explosion... just like the night after. The explosions also brought down parts of the mine’s tunnels. So Jupe was right once again in claiming that those were not earthquakes. It’s always the same with him.

So Radcliffe was searching for gold while we were hiking over Fog Mountain and suddenly we met the phantom—to be precise, Marc. He had also taken position on the mountain, because the operation should start from there. He was about to pitch his tent when we ran into him. So he decided to test his phantom disguise on us. This eerie howling came from a recording. Marc had been working on this sound and its shocking effect on his computer at home for days—with overwhelming success, I would say.

The steps we heard in front of our tent the following night—that was also Marc. He was on his way to Lakeview, where he wanted to meet secretly with Mr Falkner, and almost stumbled over our tent. He had already guessed that this tent was where the three idiots from the afternoon were in, but decided not to overdo it and went on. How considerate of him.

At the meeting with Mr Falkner, Marc told about his encounter with us and they discussed the next steps. But they didn't get the chance to carry out their plans, because the next day Marc discovered the mountain cabin by chance. Radcliffe surprised him. He was afraid Marc would report his hiding place to the police, but the latter didn't know anything about an escaped convict.

Radcliffe overpowered and tied Marc, dragged him into the cave and squeezed information out from him. Now it was Marc who was really scared (serves him right!), and he revealed who he was, what the phantom disguise was for and what plans he was pursuing together with Falkner. And that's when Radcliffe decided to simply take over those very plans.

Marc had told him that Lakeview was the entrance to the mine. Radcliffe now realized that he had been looking in the wrong place all along. So the following night, he put on the phantom costume and came down to the house under the cover of the fog. He disabled the Mastersons' power lines, phone and car so that they would have to flee on foot and stay away long enough. And then Radcliffe put on exactly the show that Marc and Falkner had planned.

Mr Falkner naturally thought Marc was under the disguise, and played the game, which was no longer a game at all. Outside, in the fog, he was then knocked down by Radcliffe and dragged up the mountain.

I've already written down the rest of the story about this night of horror. I am slowly getting tired. After this exhausting day, I will probably sleep like a rock. The rest now in a nutshell:

The Mastersons were of course shocked by everything that happened. Jupe forced Falkner to tell them himself how he was involved in the whole story. The sense of guilt was written all over his face. At first I thought he wasn't going to say anything. But then he actually laid the whole truth out on the table. To be honest, I was really impressed. I wouldn't have thought a coward like Falkner would be capable of that.

By the way, Marc was a crook as well. When we were planning to ambush the phantom, he did not even tell us that the phantom was Radcliffe in a costume. It would have made things easier for us had we knew that.

To make it even shorter, Mrs Masterson wasn't impressed at all. In fact, she was outraged. She unceremoniously threw Falkner out... and Marc right behind. She didn't care how they got home. But Marc still has his tent with him.

What remains is the question of what we will do with the rest of our holidays. Nobody wants to go hiking anymore. But Jupe already has a new plan. He didn't really want to come out with it yet, but if I assess the situation correctly, we'll be underground again very soon...

18. In the Labyrinth

“Okay, we’re heading east now,” Pete directed.

“Head due east?” Bob asked.

“Well, a little south too. East-southeast,” Pete said.

“I’ve got to know that, Pete, or I can throw the map away right now!” Bob remarked.

“All right, all right, Bob. East-southeast, then. Jupe, are you counting?”

“... Twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. Fifteen metres north,” Jupiter said.

Pete looked at his compass and confirmed, “Just north this time.”

Bob nodded contentedly and marked it on the map. Then he lifted the flashlight and shone it into the tunnel leading north. In the distance, he could already see the next junction. This mine was really a labyrinth!

Two days had passed since the dramatic events in these tunnels. Mr Falkner had probably arrived in Green Valley by now and left for home. He would probably never set foot in this area again. At the thought of it, Pete giggled.

“What’s so funny?” Jupiter asked.

“I just remember how Mrs Masterson freaked out when she found out Falkner had made her into a novel character... That look on her face. She was so horrified, it was like taking secret photos of her in her underwear.”

“Poor Falkner,” Bob said.

“There, there!” Jupiter warned. “I wouldn’t exactly regret it. He has behaved very badly!”

“Yes. But he’s punished enough already. The years of research, the carefully considered plan—all this for nothing! He did not get what he wanted. No gold and no novel—at least not the one he wanted.”

“Serves him right,” Jupiter insisted. Then he smiled. “Plus, we have the bigger room at Lakeview now.”

The Three Investigators had decided to end their hike and spend the rest of the week with the Mastersons instead. For not all the secrets of Fog Mountain had been revealed yet. The last open question was whether there was actually a hidden gold deposit in the mine.

The only reference to this was the letter Richard Ashford had written to Melissa Radcliffe. But maybe Ashford had only made up the story to look good in front of his mistress. Was the mine possibly dead? That was what they had to find out.

The Three Investigators had set out to explore the mine and go in search of the gold. After they had tried to mark the winding paths with arrows and question marks on the first day and got lost a number of times, they had now started to map the mine in every detail. They were explorers in a forgotten labyrinth. That was much, much better than any hike!

“We have now walked eight and a half metres to the next junction,” reported Jupiter. “The tunnel to the right is about one and a half metres wide and leads to...”

“The northeast direction. Hey! Look over there!” Pete shone a light into the newly discovered tunnel.

It wasn’t very long. At its end was something The Three Investigators had never encountered in their search through the tunnels—a wooden gate. Curious, they approached it.

There was a sign hanging on the gate.

“‘No trespassing! Danger of collapse’,” Jupiter read aloud and suddenly he felt a tingling in his stomach. He looked at Bob. Then Pete. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“That we shouldn’t go in there unless we want to be buried alive?” Pete asked. “Yes, absolutely, that’s what I think.”

But the First Investigator shook his head unwillingly. “Couldn’t it be that Richard Ashford at that time closed this tunnel and put up the warning sign to keep a secret from the curious miners?”

“You mean...”

“Just that!” Jupiter checked the gate.

There was a lock, but it was hanging open on the latch. Whoever had been here last had not seen fit to lock the gate. The wooden wing was just leaning against it. But the hinges were so badly rusted that it could hardly be moved. As Jupiter pulled violently, rust trickled to the ground and the gate swung open with a long, tormented squeak that echoed endlessly in the tunnels.

With a pounding heart, The Three Investigators entered the cave behind the gate. It was small and round. In the middle, a wooden ladder led up and through an opening in the ceiling one level higher. One of the upper rungs was broken. And at the bottom of the ladder was—

“A skeleton!” The Second Investigator let out a little cry. He looked into the black eye sockets of a grinning skull.

A cold shiver ran down the back of The Three Investigators as they looked down at the pale skeleton, which shone brightly in the light of the flashlight. The man—if it had been a man—had been lying here for a very, very long time. The bones were completely white and smooth, only shreds of clothing were hanging from them. The body was terribly twisted and contorted. The head, to which the remains of hair still stuck, looked up. There was no doubt—this man had fallen from the ladder when the top rung gave way, and had broken his neck. It was a horrible sight.

For a long time, nobody said a word until Jupiter broke the silence. “I think now we know why Richard Ashford disappeared without a trace.”

“You really think that’s Ashford?” Bob asked whisperingly.

“That is the only explanation that makes sense,” replied Jupiter. “Ashford was the only one who knew the access to the mine. After him, no one else came here else his body would have been found. And it also fits in with his mysterious disappearance.”

“Poor man,” Pete said. “He fell to his death decades ago and nobody noticed... until today.”

“The question is, what is the point of this gate?” Jupiter asked. “In my opinion there is no danger of collapse in this cave. The ladder giving way was pure coincidence.”

The First Investigator looked up through the opening. “We’ve got to get up there!”

“Are... are you sure?” Pete stuttered. “Is it not too dangerous?”

“Are you scared of the skeleton?” Jupiter asked mockingly. “You don’t need to. It’s dead.”

“Very funny,” Pete retaliated. “I’m talking about the ladder. I do not wish to share Ashford’s fate.”

“I agree with you,” Jupiter said. “We’ll find something else.”

The Three Investigators hurried back and brought another ladder from one of the other tunnels that was stable enough to carry them. Then they set it up next to the skeleton and climbed to the upper level one after the other.

The hole in the ceiling led to a long tunnel. It was a little narrower than the others and led endlessly far into the mountain. At first sight, it looked exactly like the other tunnels they had examined so far. But when they let the cones of light from their flashlights glide over the walls, they saw the difference—the rock sparkled!

Jupiter held his breath. He went closer to the left wall and stroked his finger over the cold stone. Bright, shiny metallic veins ran through the rock, shimmering like the reflections of a slightly moving water surface. They covered the entire tunnel wall and stretched deep into the mountain, further than their flashlights could reach. It glittered everywhere! It was like a legendary treasure cave, they looked around in awe. No one dared to speak out. But then they did, they said it in unison: “Gold!”

Bob’s travel diary:

And so ended our case. We found the gold!

Now who it actually belongs to, the police and a number of lawyers will have to clarify. We don’t really care, because we’ll be getting a finder’s fee either way, that’s for sure. (To be honest—a bit of gold has already been knocked out of the wall by each of us to keep as a souvenir, but I will keep this fact quiet in the official case report, which I will prepare as soon as we are back in Rocky Beach.)

The Mastersons celebrate us as heroes and are now considering whether they should perhaps give tourist tours of the mine as a remedy for the loneliness up here. I think that’s a great idea.

It remains to mention that Pete insists that his stupid alarm clock gets a place of honour in our headquarters. He never tires of pointing out that that thing saved our lives eventually. Jupe and I are prepared to go along with that... but only if we remove the batteries first.